

JESUS



DO NOT LET
YOUR HEARTS
BE TROUBLED."

—JOHN 14:1

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

AND HOW HE
CHANGED THE WORLD



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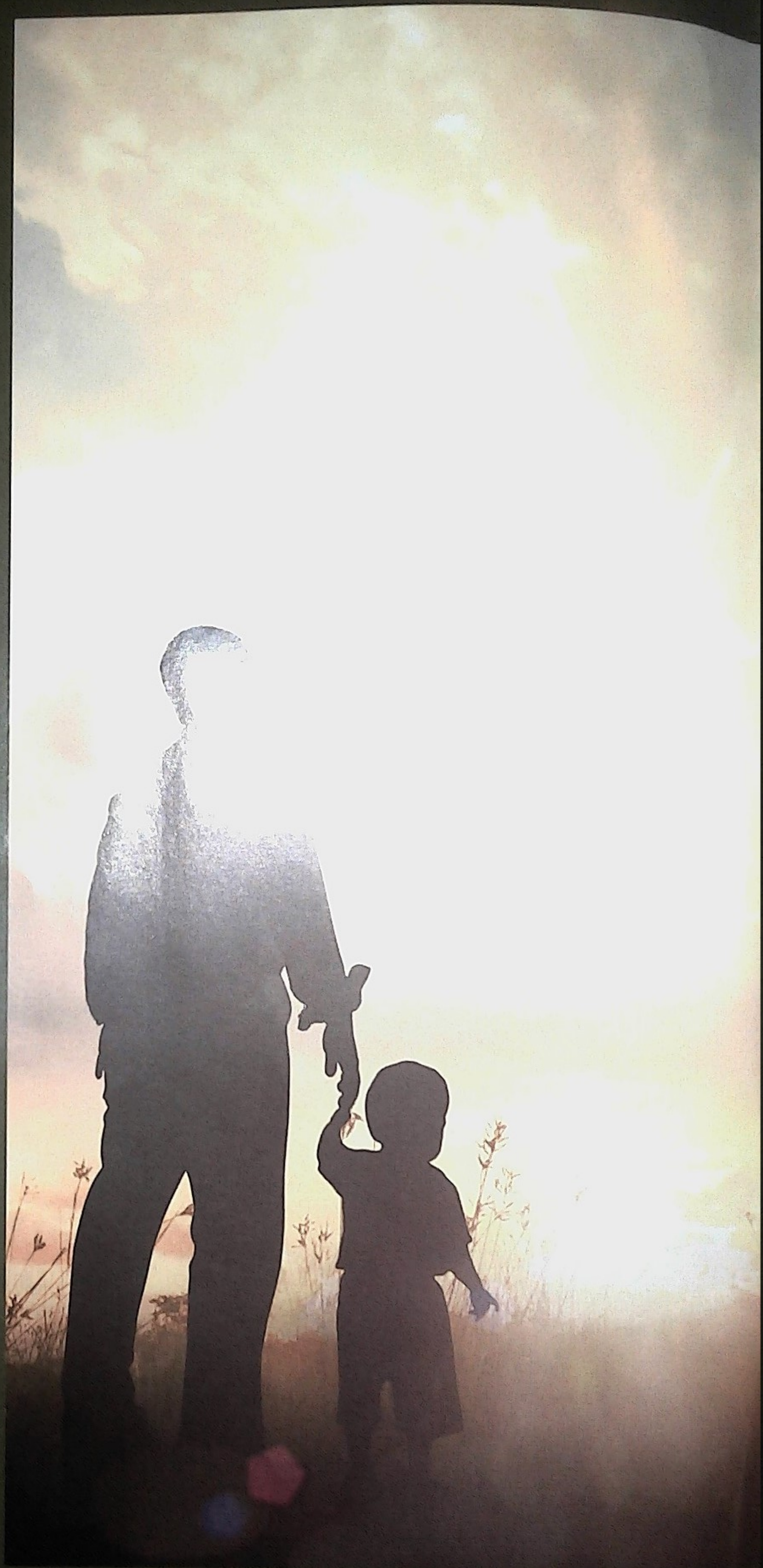
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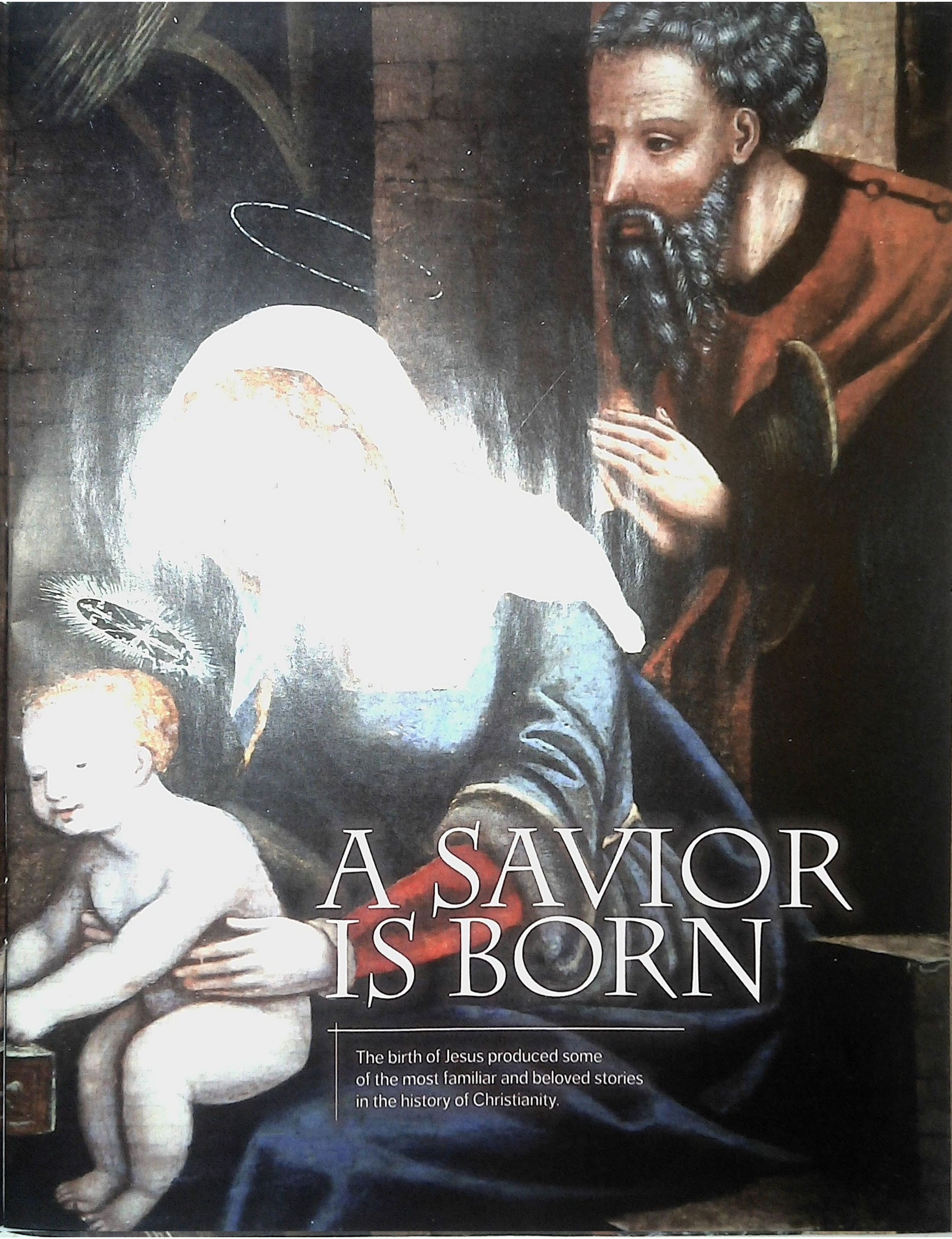
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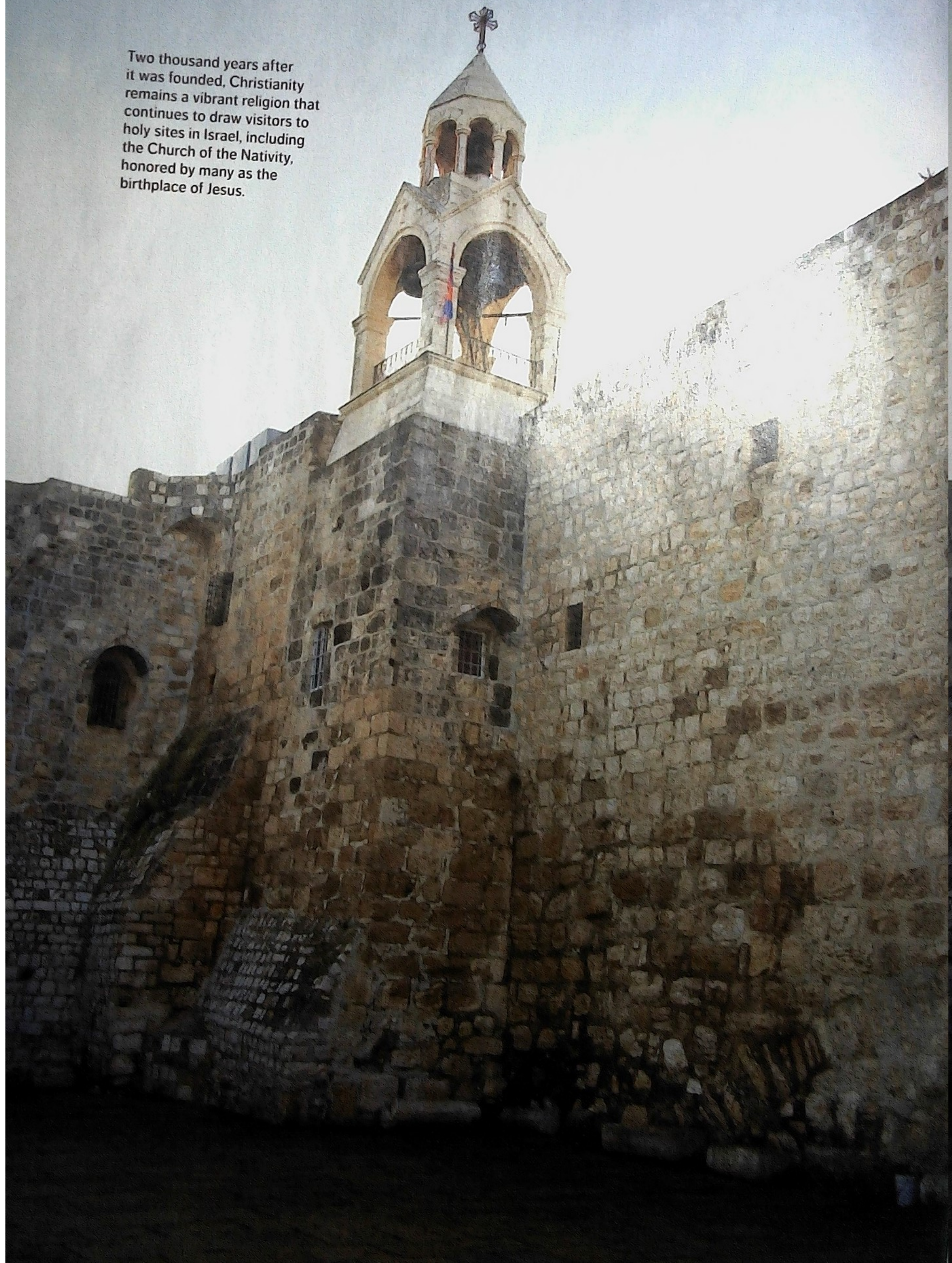
This rendering of the *Adoration of the Magi* by Georg Pencz depicts the story of the three wise men who, guided by a bright star, travel from afar to worship the baby Jesus.



A SAVIOR IS BORN

The birth of Jesus produced some
of the most familiar and beloved stories
in the history of Christianity.

Two thousand years after
it was founded, Christianity
remains a vibrant religion that
continues to draw visitors to
holy sites in Israel, including
the Church of the Nativity,
honored by many as the
birthplace of Jesus.



T

HE STORY OF JESUS'S LIFE BEGINS, AS EVERY LIFE MUST, WITH HIS BIRTH. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY TALES IN HUMAN HISTORY MORE SOULFUL,

richer in depth and interest, or more powerfully evocative than those that believers recite every year at Christmas? Let's begin by simply letting the stories speak for themselves. The quotations used below are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible—as are all the scriptural passages cited in this book—and we begin with the Gospel according to Luke, which is the version of the story most familiar and celebrated.

Luke makes carefully constructed “annunciations,” which feature appearances by angels to Mary, the mother of Jesus, with an important message: The child to be born has a vital role to play, one foretold of in the scriptures. As the angel famously says to Mary:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.”

“Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God....’ Then Mary said, ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’”



According to Luke, it was the angel Gabriel who announced to Mary that the child she would bear would be “great” and “will be called the Son of the Most High.” The artwork above depicting the scene was created by Fra Angelico in the fifteenth century and appears in the Convent of San Marco in Florence, Italy.

A BIRTH TO BE CELEBRATED

Soon follows the vivid birth story itself, which begins with Luke's placing of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem.

"While they were there," Luke reports, "the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

"When the angels had left them and gone into

heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."

FAMOUS ADDITIONS TO THE STORY

Other parts of the story are added by Matthew, who also has an annunciation, but in this case, the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream to assure him that the child Mary will bear is "from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew then presents the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (7:14), which calls for a woman to "conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

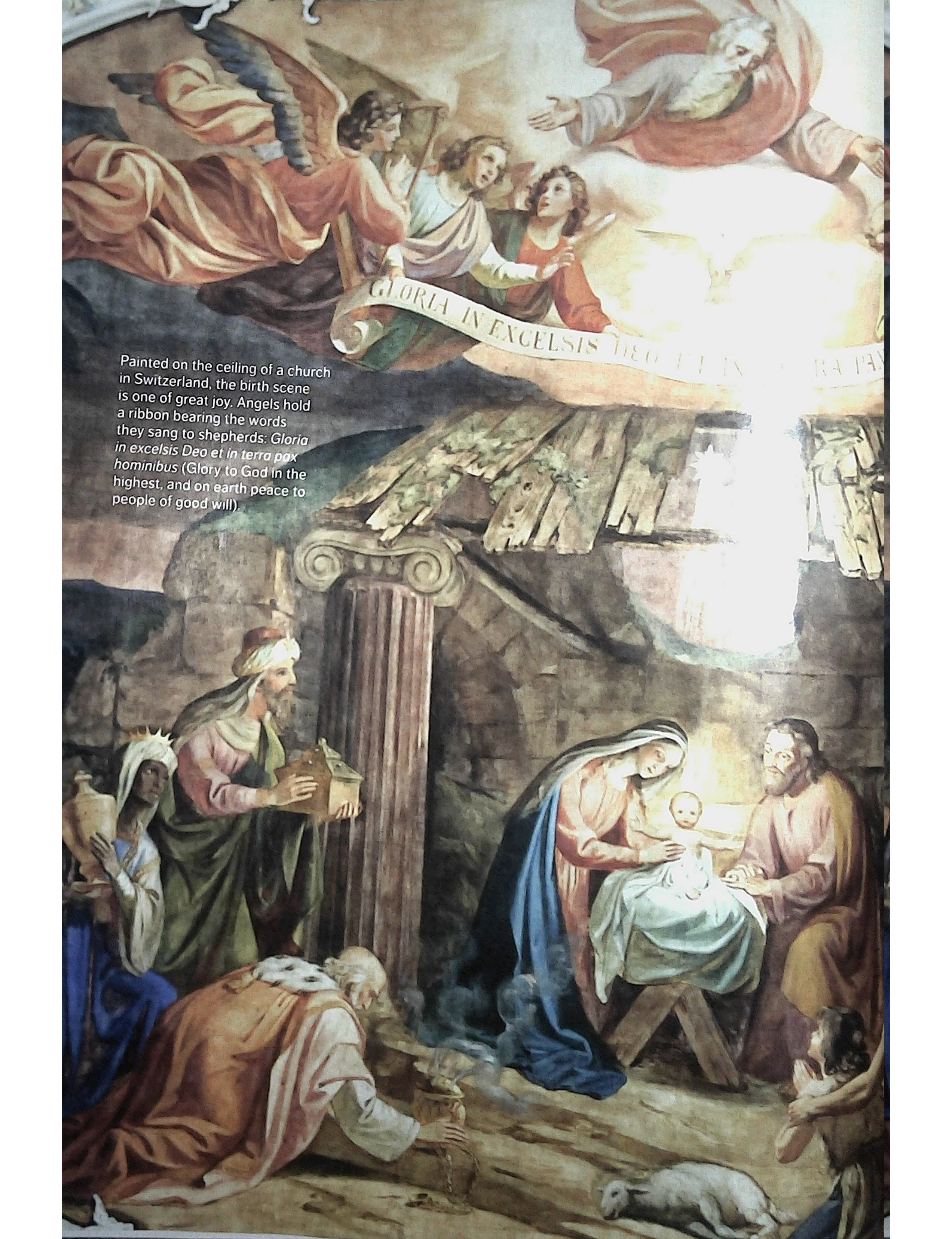
Matthew then brings his own distinctive vignettes to the birth story, including the story of the vengeful King Herod, who hears of a child born to the "King of the Jews" and commissions a collection of wise men to find Jesus so that he, Herod, might pay them homage." The wise men, following a star that guides them on

Three wise men following a bright star through the desert to visit the baby Jesus is part of the Christmas story that is unique to the Gospel of Matthew.



The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth includes a cave where the remains of the home believed to be Mary's are preserved; pilgrims visit the sacred site from all over the world.





Painted on the ceiling of a church in Switzerland, the birth scene is one of great joy. Angels hold a ribbon bearing the words they sang to shepherds: *Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus* (Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will).



their journey, find the child, offer Him gifts, and then, learning of Herod's bad intentions in a dream, foil Herod's plan to find and possibly harm the child. Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with their newborn son and only settle back in Galilee after the death of Herod, when an angel tells Joseph it is safe to return.

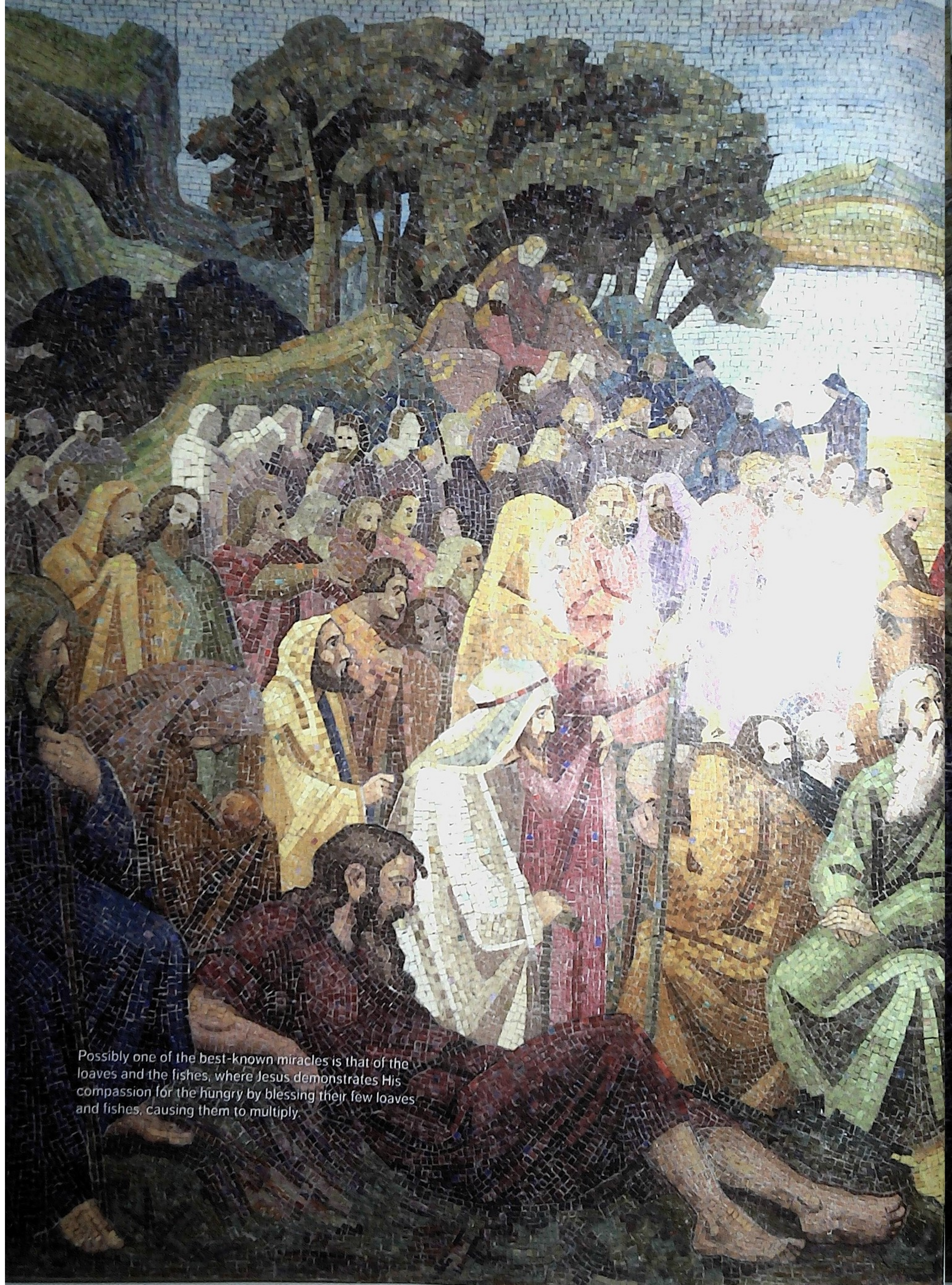
JOY TO THE WORLD!

For those of us who are Christians, it may matter less the exact story of how Jesus was born—what matters is that he *was* born. For us, the Christmas season is a time of great joy, when we gather together, sing the traditional anthems, and give thanks to God for the gift He gave to the world in the form of His son, Jesus. Services are routinely held late on Christmas Eve and the feeling in the air is one of great expectation, as if indeed the birth of Jesus is happening all over again, right here in the twenty-first century. Near the end of the service, the parishioners, often with candles in hand providing the only light in the darkened sanctuary, rise to sing perhaps the holiest of the carols, "Silent Night."

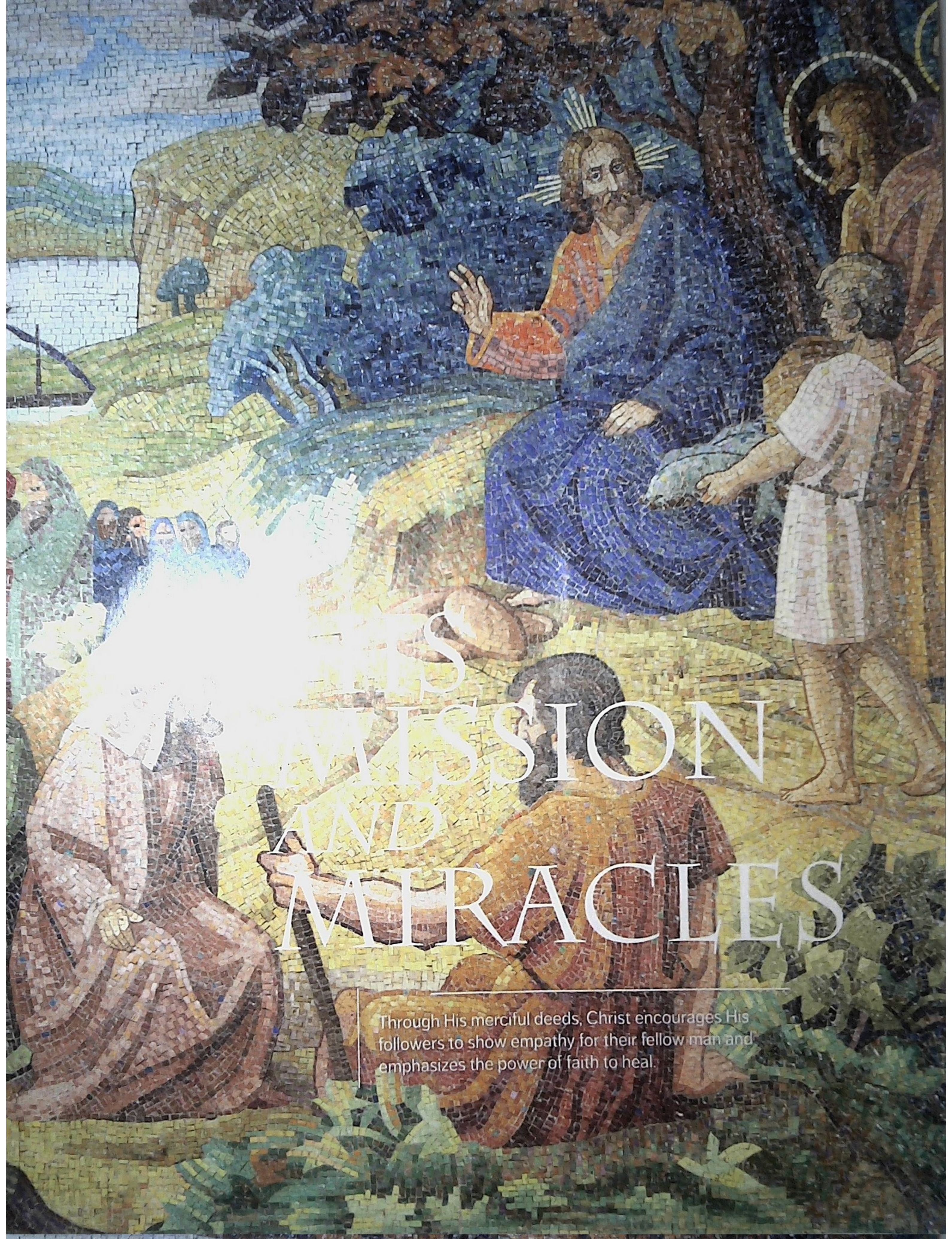
Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon virgin, mother and child.
Holy infant so tender and mild.
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar.
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia.
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born.

Silent night, holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.



Possibly one of the best-known miracles is that of the loaves and the fishes, where Jesus demonstrates His compassion for the hungry by blessing their few loaves and fishes, causing them to multiply.



CHRIST'S MISSION AND MIRACLES

Through His merciful deeds, Christ encourages His followers to show empathy for their fellow man and emphasizes the power of faith to heal.



HERE MAY BE A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT VER- SIONS OF THE STORY OF JESUS'S BIRTH, BUT THE THEMES OF HIS MINISTRY ARE PRETTY

JOHN THE BAPTIST

All four Gospels place their discussions of Jesus's ministry in the context of the work of John the Baptist, who is presented as the one who points the way to the kingdom of God and to Jesus as the one predicted by scripture to bring this kingdom into being. Mark's account is very bare-bones: "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Mark 1:4-5)

Mark then tells the story, also present in all the Gospels, of Jesus being baptized by John, of John's affirmation of the leadership of Jesus, and of John's critical role as the one who prepares the way for Jesus's ministry. Luke's lyrical paraphrase of the prophet Isaiah in describing John's role is memorable. John's

similar in each: He begins His teaching in Galilee, where He struggles for acceptance in certain areas while earning devoted followers and fame in others. He eventually begins preaching outside Galilee, and finally travels to Jerusalem for the events that provide the dramatic conclusion to His life. Within that broad outline, the portion of the Gospels that deals with the ministry of Jesus contains two basic elements: His sayings and teachings, including a number of parables, and His miraculous deeds. The deeds, which all involved participants or witnesses, generally include healings, exorcisms, and "nature miracles" like walking on water or calming a raging sea.

St. Wenceslas Church, a fresco of Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist (above) foretells Jesus's role as the savior who will lead followers to the kingdom of God.

The healings of Jesus, such as His healing the blind men on the road to Jericho (opposite) have appeared frequently in works of art from paintings to stained glass. In Prague's



PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.

LUKE 3:4

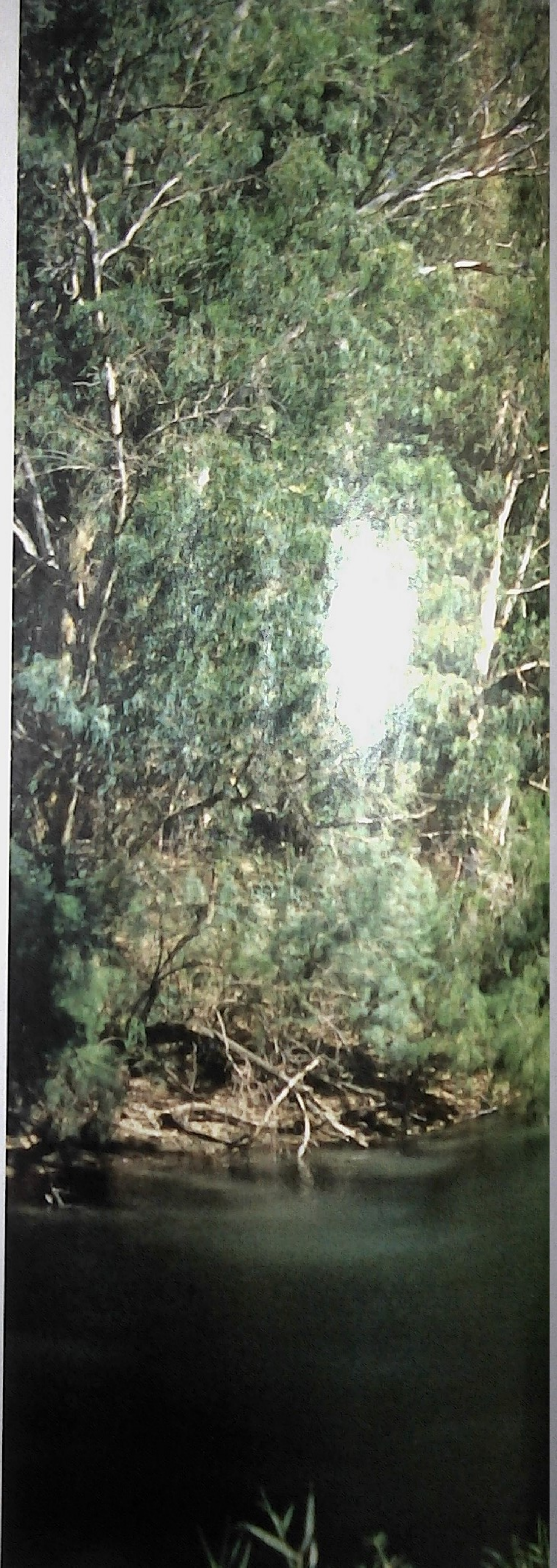
preaching, he writes, is as “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” (Luke 3:4)

The tale of John the Baptist is followed by the completion of two critical tasks that needed to be accomplished before Jesus could begin His public ministry. The first was a testing period of forty days in the wilderness as Jesus resisted the temptations of Satan.

CALLING THE DISCIPLES

After passing the test, Jesus’s next task is to build a band of dedicated followers to assist Him in His work. These, of course, become the twelve disciples. To follow Jesus’s calling, the men had to leave their families, their jobs, and their homes. They had to be willing to travel from town to town, frequently in hostile and dangerous territory, with little or no resources—according to Mark, just a staff, a pair of sandals, a single tunic, and no bread, no bag, and no money. And the disciples answered this call without hesitation. “Immediately they left their nets and followed him,” Matthew writes, describing Simon Peter and Andrew’s response to Jesus’s summons as they were fishing in the Sea of Galilee.

The waters still flow down the Jordan River (right), where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. People today make a pilgrimage to the site for baptisms, which take place in its calmer portions, like this one.







THE HEALING POWER OF FAITH

Jesus demonstrates his ability to heal many different illnesses right from the very beginning of His ministry. Nine amazing examples of people he healed are mentioned in at least two of the Gospels:

- Peter's mother-in-law, who is suffering from a high fever;
- a man who has leprosy (though it should be noted that, in Jesus's time, "leprosy" referred to any number of skin diseases, including psoriasis);
- a centurion's servant who is "close to death" (Luke 7:2), even though the soldier is not a Jew and represents the hated Roman regime;
- a paralyzed man, who has to be lowered through the roof of the home where Jesus is teaching in order to get past the impenetrable crowds;
- a man with a "withered hand," which Jesus restores in the synagogue and on the Sabbath (an event the Gospel writers present as appalling to the Pharisees, who viewed such acts as forbidden by Jewish law);
- the daughter of Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, who had appeared to be dead;
- a woman who had a blood condition that caused her to dangerously hemorrhage;
- the daughter of a Phoenician woman who, like the

centurion mentioned above, is not a Jew; a blind man, whose sight was restored by Jesus (in Matthew's version, Jesus restores the sight of two men).

Jesus often preached near the Sea of Galilee (opposite) and He and His disciples frequently crisscrossed its waters from one shore to another. In at least one instance, the crowds onshore grew so large that He was forced to cast off into the lake and preach from there.

MATTHEW 21:21

TRULY I TELL YOU, IF YOU HAVE FAITH AND DO NOT DOUBT...IT WILL BE DONE.

Jesus emphasizes the faith of each person as the critical component in their healing. Luke's account of the healing of the woman with the blood condition is a good example:

"Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'" (Luke 8:43-48)

Bible scholars have pointed to the specific details contained in these healing stories as strong evidence that they are based on actual events. While the nature of miracles feel more symbolic, the healing stories read more like factual reports, with specific locations, specific individuals (some of them identified by name), and very specific details about the circumstances of the healing. Something real seems to have taken place. Healings were not uncommon; they are not uncommon today. Even the medical establishment has had to acknowledge that there are numerous cases in which people with serious illnesses, even with cancer, have miraculously been cured.



The miracle of Jesus calming the sea is recalled in countless works of art, including this one painted on an altar in Croatia. The most famous rendition, Rembrandt's *Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee*, was tragically stolen in 1990 and remains missing to this day.

THE NATURE MIRACLES

To our ears, many of the stories of Jesus's miracle seem strange, even unbelievable, and contrary to our understanding of the way the world works. But in Jesus's time, such wondrous events were commonly reported, and many of the other prophets and preachers in Palestine would have shared similar stories.

The so-called "nature miracles" are especially difficult to understand. There are five that appear in at least two of the Gospels.

The first, described in the Gospel of Matthew, is when Jesus calms a stormy sea—and the fears of the disciples:

"And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so

great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'" (Matthew 8:23–27)

The next two nature miracles happen consecutively in both Matthew and Mark. The first involves the "feeding of the five thousand" and the second, following immediately, describes Jesus walking on water to get to the disciples who are struggling with an

In Prague's Basilica of St. Peter and St. Paul, a fresco depicts Jesus saving Peter from drowning, a work that evokes the almost inexpressible power of myth and faith.

"But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" (Matthew 14:30-32)

In Matthew and Mark, the feeding of the five thousand is soon followed by a feeding of four thousand in very similar circumstances and with very similar results: A small amount of food—seven loaves and "a few small fish," according to Matthew—multiplies after Jesus's blessing, producing enough food to feed the crowd and yield seven baskets of leftovers as well. Finally, there is the strange little tale of Jesus cursing a fig tree and causing it to wither and die immediately, then telling the amazed disciples, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done." (Matthew 21:21)


It's important to note that these stories were extremely meaningful to the people in Jesus's time.

King Herod's policies had driven thousands of farmers from their homes. Hunger was a widespread issue. Increasing numbers of people were turning to fishing as a way to feed their families and make a living. It's no surprise that stories about feeding the hungry and controlling the raging sea would make an impact on the people of Galilee.

What is the essential message of the nature miracles? While two of them refer to the acts as proof of Jesus's divinity, the more central and consistent theme is the power of faith. As in the stories of Jesus's healing powers, the nature miracles drive home Jesus's message: that faith can make the seemingly impossible possible. Faith can calm a raging sea; faith can feed the hungry; faith can even move mountains. And, yes, faith can heal.



adverse wind. In the feeding miracle, Jesus is responding to the hunger of a large crowd that has gathered to hear Him; motivated by compassion, He blesses the loaves and the fishes, and they are miraculously multiplied. In Matthew's telling of the water-walking miracle, Peter too attempts to stroll across the sea, but falls in because his faith is not strong enough.

A photograph of a hill covered in dense, tall grass and reeds. The vegetation is a mix of green and brown, suggesting some dryness. The sky is bright blue with some light clouds. The text is overlaid on the lower left portion of the image.

This lovely hill in northern Israel, on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, is where many believe Jesus delivered His unforgettable Sermon on the Mount.

TEACHINGS AND PARABLES

Even contemporary Christians can underestimate how radical the message of Jesus was in the first century, and how challenging it remains today.



THE INSPIRING DEEDS OF JESUS ARE OFTEN ACCOMPANIED BY SAYINGS AND PARABLES THAT CHALLENGE THE GENERALLY ACCEPTED

views of the day. In many cases, He speaks very directly; in others, He communicates through aphorisms—short, clever phrases that simply express an important concept; and in others, He uses vivid stories known as parables to convey His teachings. Many

scholars believe Jesus spoke in parables so frequently because they invite discussion, encourage interpretation, and ask every listener to find some meaning in them. Because of this, the parables have been interpreted in many different ways over the centuries.



Though the evidence gathered through the centuries is not conclusive, the Church of the Beatitudes (above) marks the spot where many believe Jesus spoke what are perhaps His most famous words: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

DO TO OTHERS
AS YOU WOULD
HAVE THEM
DO TO YOU.

LUKE 6:31

AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE OF HOPE

Both Matthew and Luke recall Jesus's public teachings starting with the Sermon on the Mount, where he shared the eight blessings known as the Beatitudes. Jesus's words are moving even in our age. But to those he spoke to at the time—people who suffered from lack of opportunity, poverty and grief over the loss of friends and family in repeated conflicts with the oppressive Roman regime—Jesus's words must have been positively explosive. Matthew's version is more spiritual in emphasis; Luke's is more direct:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6:20–31)



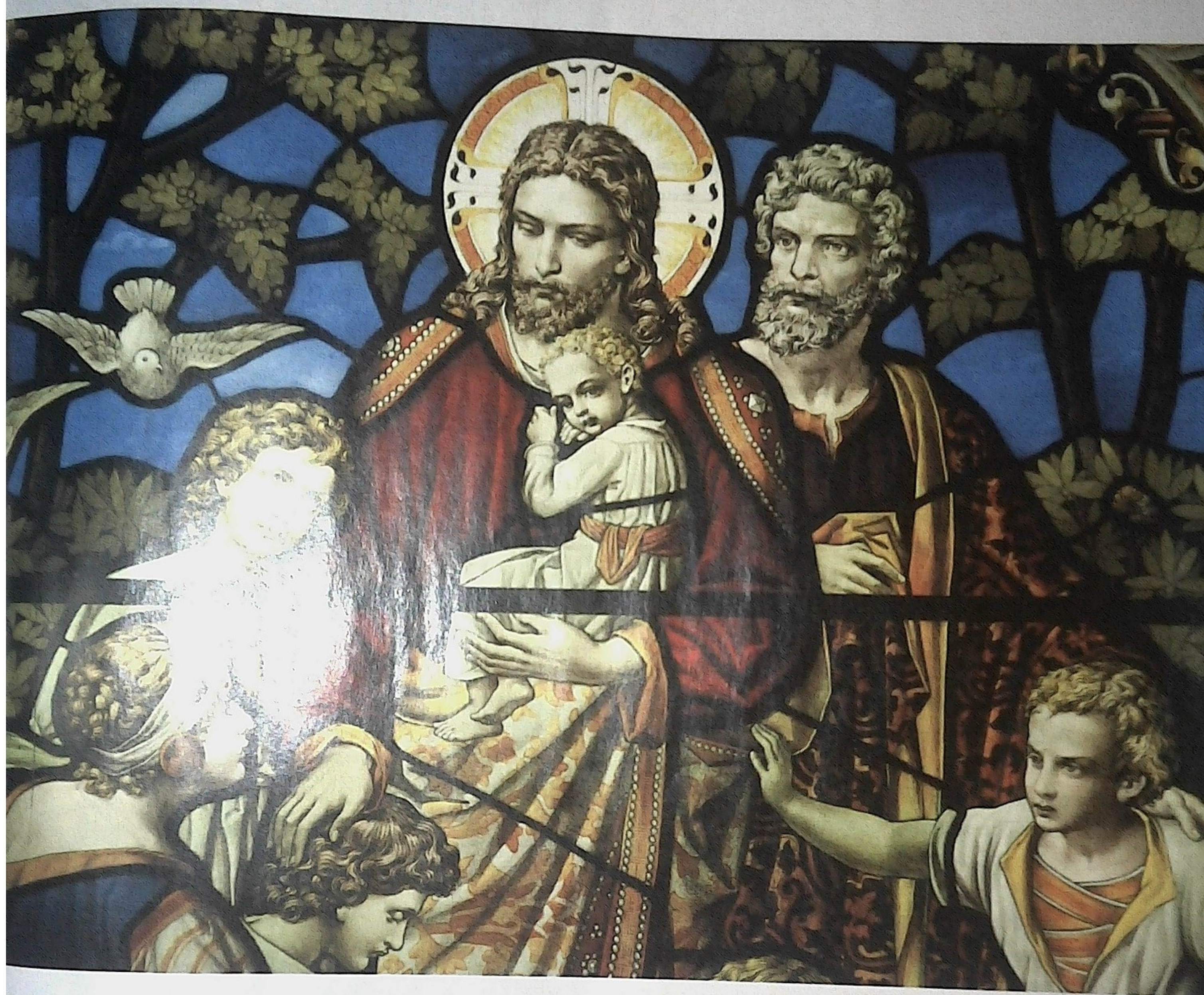
A NEW WAY OF THINKING AND ACTING

Even as the Beatitudes give hope to those who are suffering, they challenge listeners to embrace a new way of thinking and behaving. In another passage, Matthew 19:23–24, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” The message is clear: The kingdom of God will not belong to the ones who seem to have all the money and power in this world. Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes (5:3–11) confirms this notion, adding the following to Luke’s retelling: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.... Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” The meek, the

pure in heart, and the peacemakers aren’t typically the ones the world believes will triumph. How would the hungry, poor, oppressed Jews of the time have reacted to this message?

A VERY DIFFERENT MESSENGER

And of course, it wasn’t just Jesus’s message that was revolutionary. It was also the way he lived—associating with tax collectors and prostitutes, preaching and healing among the Gentiles, sharing meals with whoever wished to join Him. Many of these behaviors were thought to be improper and were even considered by the Pharisees to be contrary to Jewish law, particularly when they took place on the Sabbath. Jesus offered teachings and parables in response to all the objections; time after time He rejects the law in favor of compassion, inclusivity and connection. His



Jesus healed strangers and would-be enemies as depicted in this painting (opposite) as He spread His message of compassion and inclusivity. Further, He

upset the expected order of power when He insisted that the kingdom of heaven awaited not the powerful, but the lowly, and He invited children into that fold.

disciples, who still held on to traditional thinking and were concerned about status and position, are constantly confronted by Jesus.

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples

spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” (Mark 10:13–16)

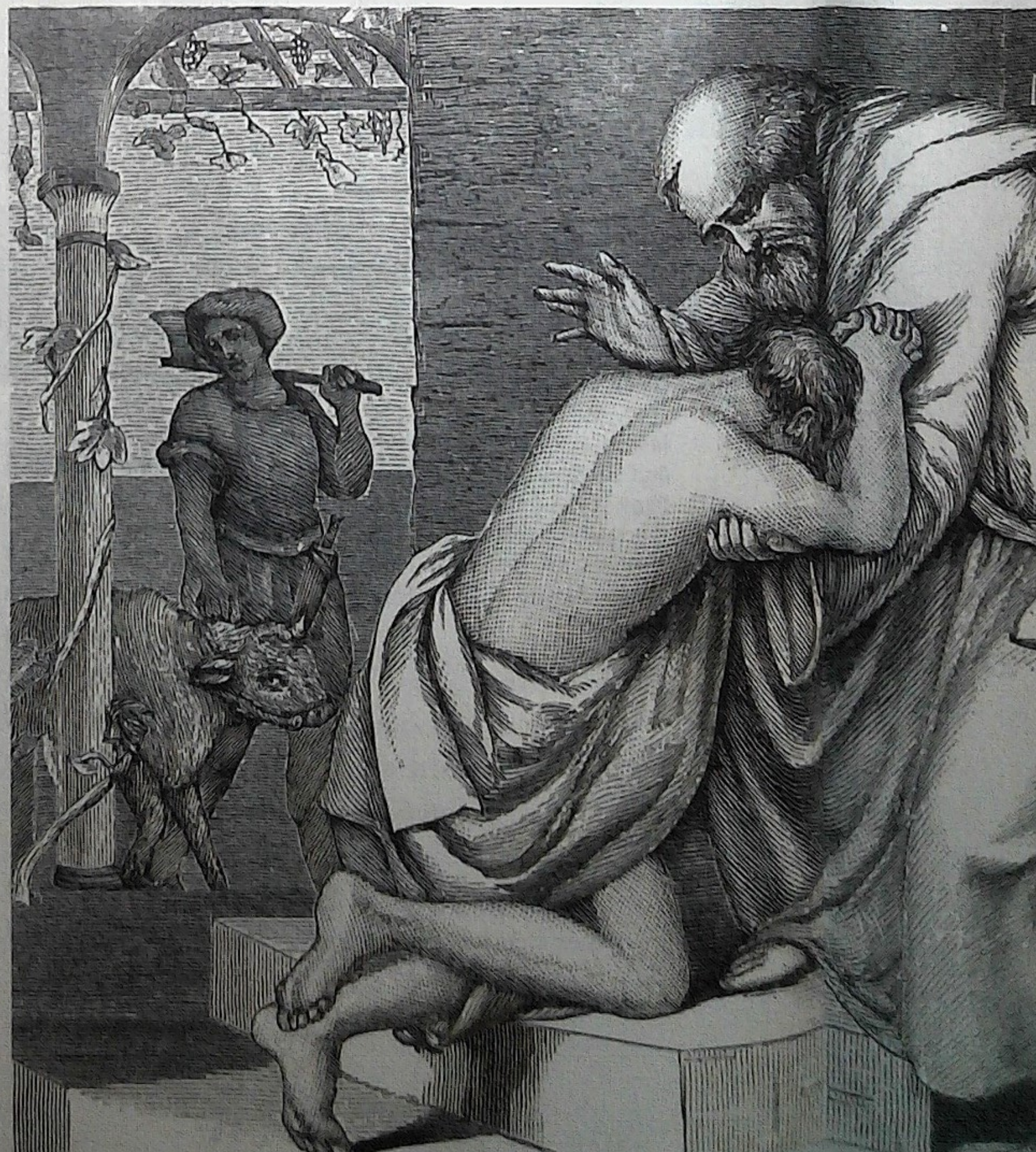
Imagine the disciples’ response to this event: “The kingdom belongs to the little children? We thought it belonged to us!”

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Two of Jesus's most well-known parables appear only in the Gospel of Luke but are very much a part of His message throughout His ministry. The first is known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Luke 10:30-37)

It is difficult to overstate the impact this parable must have had on Jesus's audience. A man is traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a route known to be dangerous, where criminals lie in wait for unwary travelers. Sure enough, the man is attacked, beaten, and left by the side of the road. Two prominent members of the Jewish clergy come upon the scene and scuttle by on the other side of the road. And who becomes the hero of the tale? A man from Samaria, a region widely reviled in Galilee and Judea, whose people were considered unclean, inferior, and not to be valued or respected. To the traditional Jewish listeners, this parable must have come like a bolt from the blue, as it surely was not what they expected.

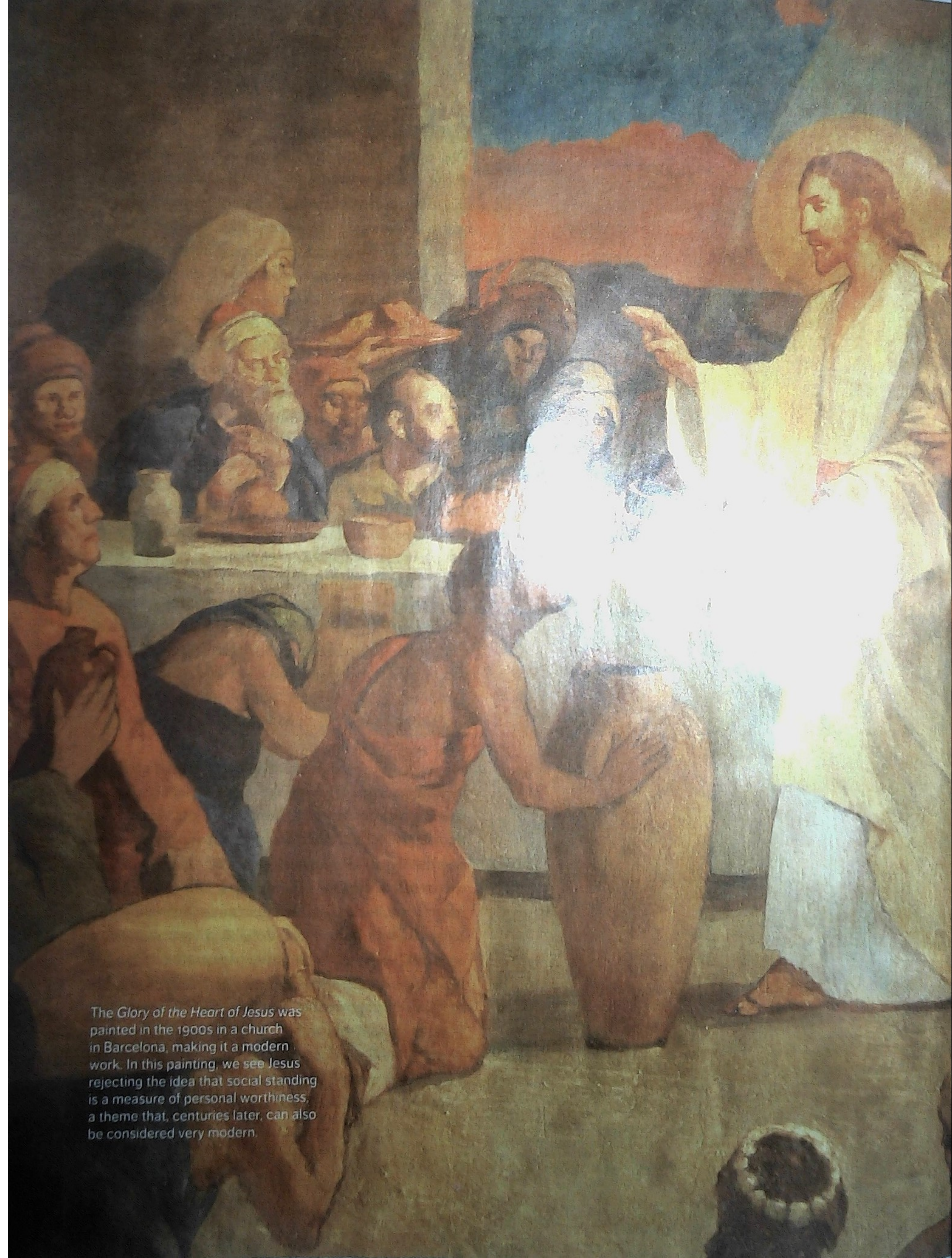




THE PRODIGAL SON

The other familiar parable from Luke is the tale of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). Again, Jesus presents a story that runs counter to expectations. A man has two sons. The older son stays home, helps his father, and obeys all the rules. The younger son takes his inheritance, leaves home, and squanders his fortune through all sorts of immoral behavior. Returning in disgrace, the younger son throws himself at his father's feet. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Rather than responding with condemnation and judgment, the father answers his son's despair with compassion, ordering that a feast be organized to celebrate the return of his wayward son. The elder son learns of this celebration and is furious. "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" The father's response is simple: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The majority of Jesus's listeners—and perhaps a high percentage of people hearing this story today—would probably have identified with the outrage of the older brother. The moralism of the day, not to mention typical family custom, called for the younger son to be condemned and punished. As it is frequently interpreted, is this parable intended to illustrate God's forgiveness of human sin? Possibly, but it also serves again to illustrate the radically new notion of human relations to be expected in the newly declared kingdom of God. As reported in Matthew (18:21–22), "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'"



The *Glory of the Heart of Jesus* was painted in the 1900s in a church in Barcelona, making it a modern work. In this painting, we see Jesus rejecting the idea that social standing is a measure of personal worthiness, a theme that, centuries later, can also be considered very modern.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU, BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE YOU.

LUKE 6:27

will of God is my brother and my sister and mother."

(Mark 3:32-35) Family, which often functioned as an oppressive institution for members of Jesus's culture, was to be rejected, even blown apart if necessary. "From now on," Jesus says in Luke (12:52-53), "five in one household will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." Crossan notes in this instance how the family is divided by generations, suggesting, he says, that Jesus is rejecting the typical power dynamic in the Mediterranean family that put the older generation above and in charge of the younger. Radical stuff indeed.

Here again we see Jesus defying expectations, challenging His audience to consider a dramatically different relationship with one another, one that reflects His dramatically different relationship with everyone who comes at God's table, without regard to social position. Inviting people indiscriminately off the seats would result, Crossan notes, in "classes, sexes, and ranks all mixed up together. Anyone could be reclining next to anyone else, female next to male, free next to slave, socially high next to socially low, and ritually pure next to ritually impure." Crossan describes this arrangement, particularly in a society dominated by the concepts of honor and shame as a "social nightmare."

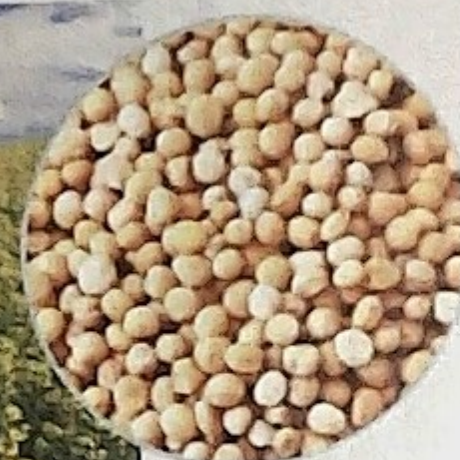
Crossan also notes how radically Jesus rejects the centrality of family. Mark tells of a visit Jesus receives from His family: "A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And he looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the Jesus operated.

THE RADICAL JESUS

In *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperCollins, 1994), scholar John Dominic Crossan notes that Jesus's discussions and parables about communal eating—and His own practice of it in the real world—are "the symbol and embodiment ... of an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy among them." The parable he views as the best demonstration of this is the Parable of the Great Banquet, told differently in Matthew and Luke. Despite the differences, the bottom line is the same: The host of a wedding banquet, having been rejected by his invited guests, decides to fill his hall with whomever his servants can find on the streets. In Luke, this includes "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame"; in Matthew it includes "both good and bad." For Crossan, this is the clearest expression of how Jesus envisions the kingdom of God as a place where everyone is welcome at God's table, without regard to social position. Inviting people indiscriminately off the seats would result, Crossan notes, in "classes, sexes, and ranks all mixed up together. Anyone could be reclining next to anyone else, female next to male, free next to slave, socially high next to socially low, and ritually pure next to ritually impure." Crossan describes this arrangement, particularly in a society dominated by the concepts of honor and shame as a "social nightmare."

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD



Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to the tiny mustard seed (above)—very familiar to first-century audiences—which matures into the hardy mustard plant.

The single most important concept to grasp among all of Jesus's teachings is His understanding of the kingdom of God. From the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is already here, but also as something yet to come. Many of the parables specifically address the coming of the kingdom. In other cases, the kingdom is not mentioned at all, but Jesus uses language to suggest what the coming of the kingdom should mean. N. T. Wright, the author of *Simply Jesus* (HarperCollins, 2011), says these parables—as well as Jesus's actions and behaviors—are meant to give us a picture of what life in the kingdom will be like:

"They are saying: 'Don't be surprised, but *this* is what it looks like when God's in charge....' God was fixing things, mending things, mending *people*, making new life happen. This was the new world in which the promises were coming true, in which new creation was happening, in which a real 'return from exile' was taking place in the hearts and minds and lives both of notorious sinners and of people long crippled by disease."

Of course this kingdom was not the one people expected. The Jewish people of Jesus's time expected that they would return from exile by military and polit-

ical means—by defeating and banishing the Romans, allowing them to reestablish an independent Jewish state, run by reliably righteous Jewish leadership. All this talk of love and forgiveness and healing was not the kind of revolution that Jesus's listeners had in mind at all. Yes, He sounded a bit like the apocalyptic prophets the people were accustomed to hearing: He does speak about remaining watchful for the coming of God's judgment—several of the parables are devoted to this concept—but this notion of the kingdom being among us, the idea of God being "in charge," as Wright describes it, was difficult for people to understand.

But the parables provide some clues. In Matthew (13:31–32), Jesus offers this: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." This parable is quickly followed by another: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." (Matthew 13:33) In both of these cases, Jesus presents the kingdom as something that would grow, flourish, and evolve as increasing numbers of His followers began to embrace His vision of the way God intended the world to be.



Jesus came to teach the idea of unconditional love. Erected in His honor, Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Christ the King in Lisbon, Portugal, inspire and serve as a reminder of His message of peace.

AGENT OF CHANGE

The teachings of Jesus are a clear call for change: unconditional love for all; endless forgiveness, even for those who may hate and persecute you; an egalitarian society in which all social distinctions are abolished; a kingdom of God, here and yet to come, in which the power dynamics of the world we know are turned upside down; forceful rejection and condemnation of the status quo and its hypocrisy; a call for sacrifice and discipleship. Jesus is by turns loving, passionate,

forgiving, critical, and mournful. In the end, it is no surprise that these messages, which pose a direct challenge to the political and religious authorities, would provoke hostility and opposition. The Jewish authorities thought He was trying to undermine their power and rules; the Romans thought He was promoting a revolution. In one sense, they were quite wrong. But in another, they were also quite right. Jesus came to change it all.

The Christian presence is still very much in evidence in contemporary Jerusalem. This is the dome on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, believed to be the location where Jesus died and was buried.

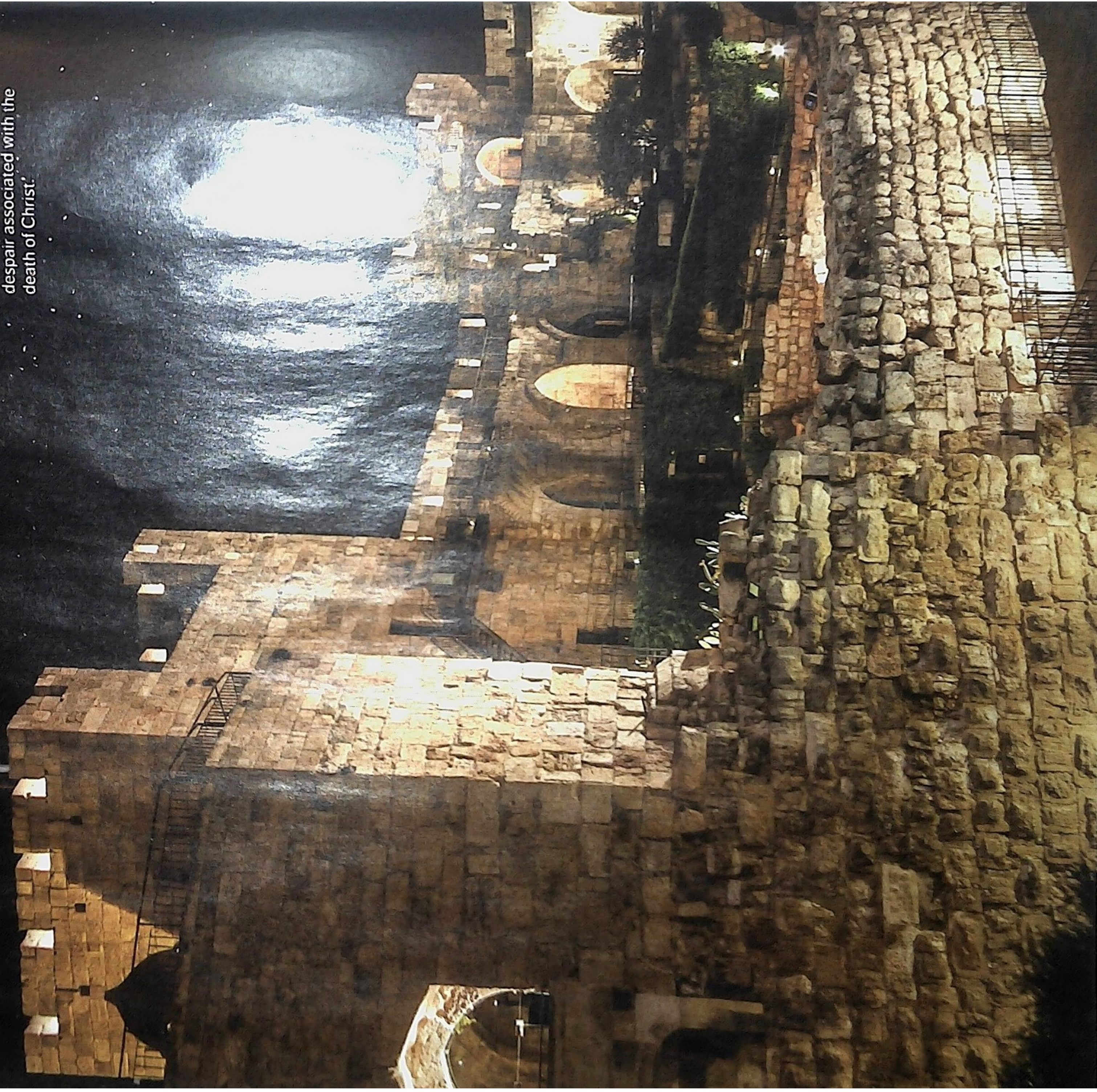


CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION



The Festival of Passover is in full swing and the holy city of Jerusalem is teeming with visitors as the story of Jesus hurtles toward its conclusion on the cross.

Nighttime is holy in Jerusalem, particularly in the part of town known as the Old City. Candles are frequently in evidence, like those held above by worshippers at a Good Friday service commemorating the Crucifixion of Jesus (opposite). Such services often conclude with the extinguishing of the candles, leaving participants, at least temporarily, in total darkness, a vivid symbol of the despair associated with the death of Christ.





THE STORY OF JESUS'S ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM, CELEBRATED ON PALM SUNDAY IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, APPEARS IN ALL FOUR GOSPELS.

Here's the version that appears in the Gospel of Mark:

"When Jesus was approaching Jerusalem, at Bethpage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' " (Mark 11:1-10)

Jesus's choice to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey was consistent with His mission to challenge traditions and change the way people thought about the world. His birth in a manger, the ideas He expressed in the Beatitudes, riding on a lowly donkey: These actions supported his overall message: The last shall be first; the high shall be laid low.

CONFLICT AT THE TEMPLE

After his triumphant arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus enters the Temple and engages in His famous conflict with the money changers. During the days leading up to Passover, thousands of Jewish pilgrims would have flocked to Jerusalem to visit the Temple and make a ritual sacrifice (typically lamb or occasionally goat, but poorer Jews often made do with doves). Frequently pilgrims had to purchase their sacrificial animal in the Temple complex itself. The money-changers were needed to convert all currency to shekels, the only form of payment accepted in the Temple.

Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple, saying "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." (Matthew 21:13)

It's clear that Jesus's actions would have angered



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the Jewish leadership by creating issues between them and the Roman authorities. The Romans counted on the Jewish leaders to keep their people under control and allowed them in exchange to practice their religion and collect their fees in whatever way they saw fit. Many believe that upsetting this delicate balance may have led to his crucifixion.

GETHSEMANE AND JESUS'S ARREST

The story of Jesus's long night of grief in the garden of Gethsemane is one of the most moving in the New Testament. As Matthew tells it:

"Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See my betrayer is at hand.' " (26:36-46)

This story is immediately followed by the account of Jesus's arrest. Those who come to take Him include the Jewish chief priests, scribes, elders, and the Temple

This is the garden of Gethsemane today. Might a scene like this have been the same one that Jesus gazed upon on the night before His arrest and crucifixion? Many Christians believe so.







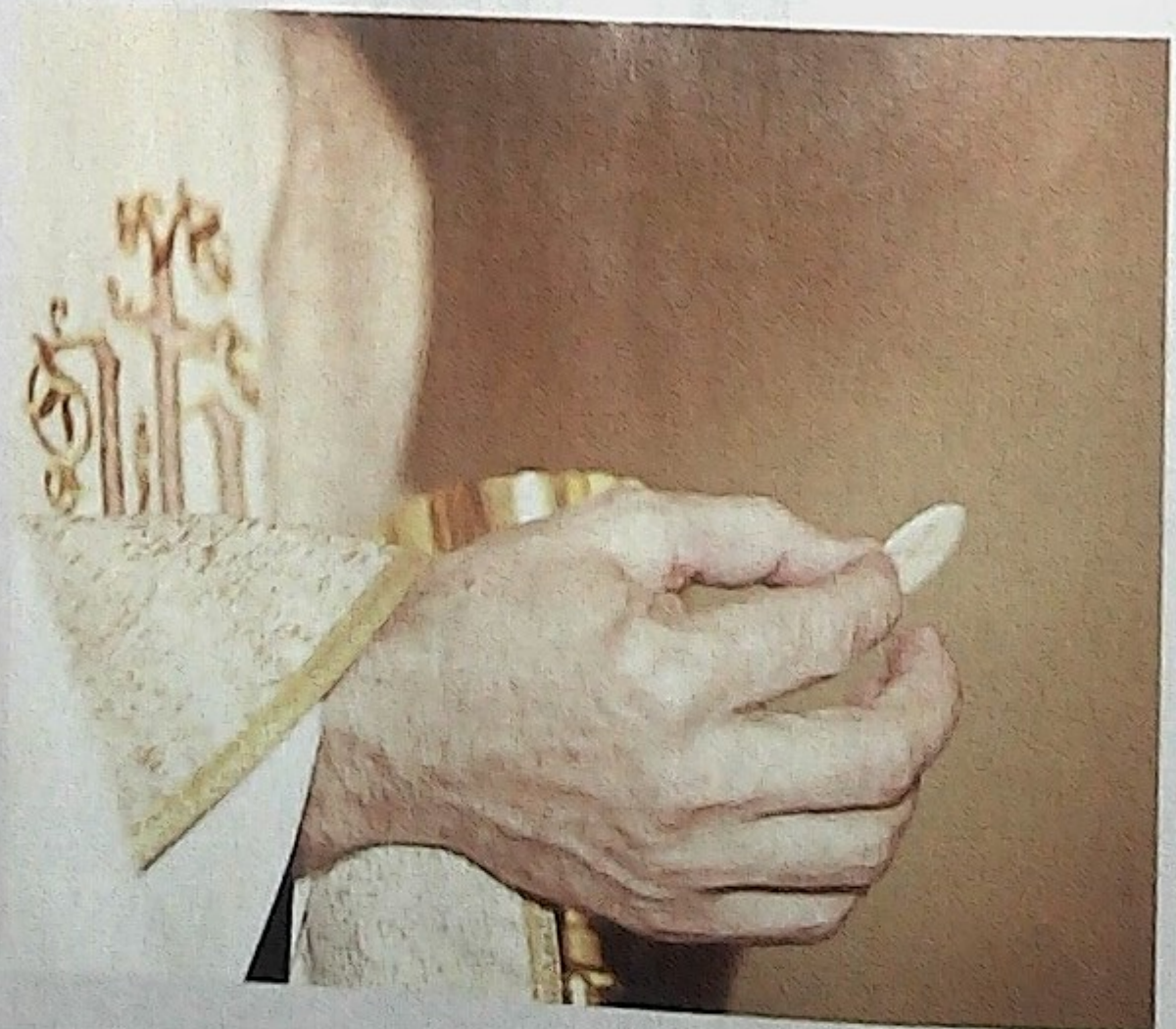
THE LAST SUPPER

There are similar accounts of the Last Supper in all of the Gospels, but only Luke included the words, "Do this in remembrance of me," the idea that has become the basis of the act of Communion in Christian churches today. Here is Matthew's account:

"While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'" (Matthew 26:26-29)

Today, the Communion ritual is administered in a variety of ways in different Christian churches: Some incorporate wine, others grape juice; some use special Communion wafers, others bread. In some churches, the elements are passed around while the congregation stay seated, and in others, worshippers leave their seats and line up to receive Communion. The person administering communion typically repeats the words "The blood of Christ" and "The body of Christ" as each worshipper receives the wine and bread.

This mosaic (above) by Giacomo Raffaelli, a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper (c. 1494-98), one of the most famous in the world. The disciples are all reacting to the moment when Jesus tells them that one of them will betray Him.



Despite the differences, the meaning of the ritual is the same: Through Communion, Christians remember the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and, in a symbolic way, participate in it. Jesus is present in the bread and wine. The faithful know this without question.



In Italy's Sacred Mountain of Varallo, more than 800 life-size statues made from wood and terracotta populate various chapels and illustrate the life, death and resurrection of Christ, this one depicting His capture and arrest.

police. Judas identifies Jesus with a kiss (except for in the book of Luke, where Jesus refuses the kiss)—and the arresting authorities quickly move in. There is a struggle, during which Simon Peter injures a servant of the high priest. Jesus heals the servant, calls for an end to the violence, and calmly allows himself to be taken away.

After Jesus's arrest comes the story of Peter's denial—a story anyone who has failed to live up to their ideals or betrayed a friend in some way can relate to. Jesus had said to Peter earlier in the evening, "... this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." (Matthew 26:34) Despite Peter's assurances that he would stand by Jesus no matter what, the prediction came true. Here is Matthew's version:

"Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' But he denied it before

all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.' Again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.' Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly." (Matthew 26:69–75)

THE TRIAL

After His arrest, Jesus was delivered to Pontius Pilate, the leader of Judea. When Pilate asks the Jewish officials what Jesus has done to deserve His arrest, they

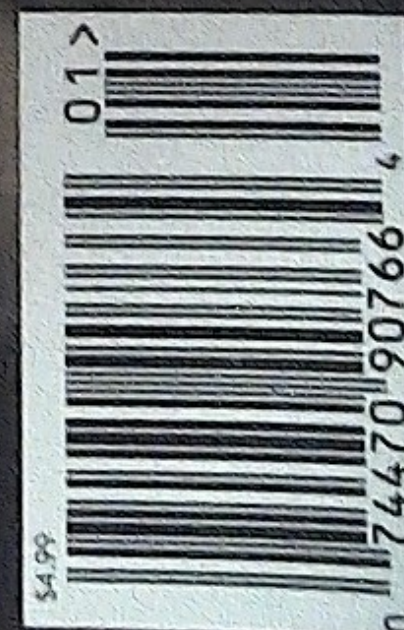
JESUS

"DO NOT LET
YOUR HEARTS
BE TROUBLED."

—JOHN 14:1

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

AND HOW HE
CHANGED THE WORLD



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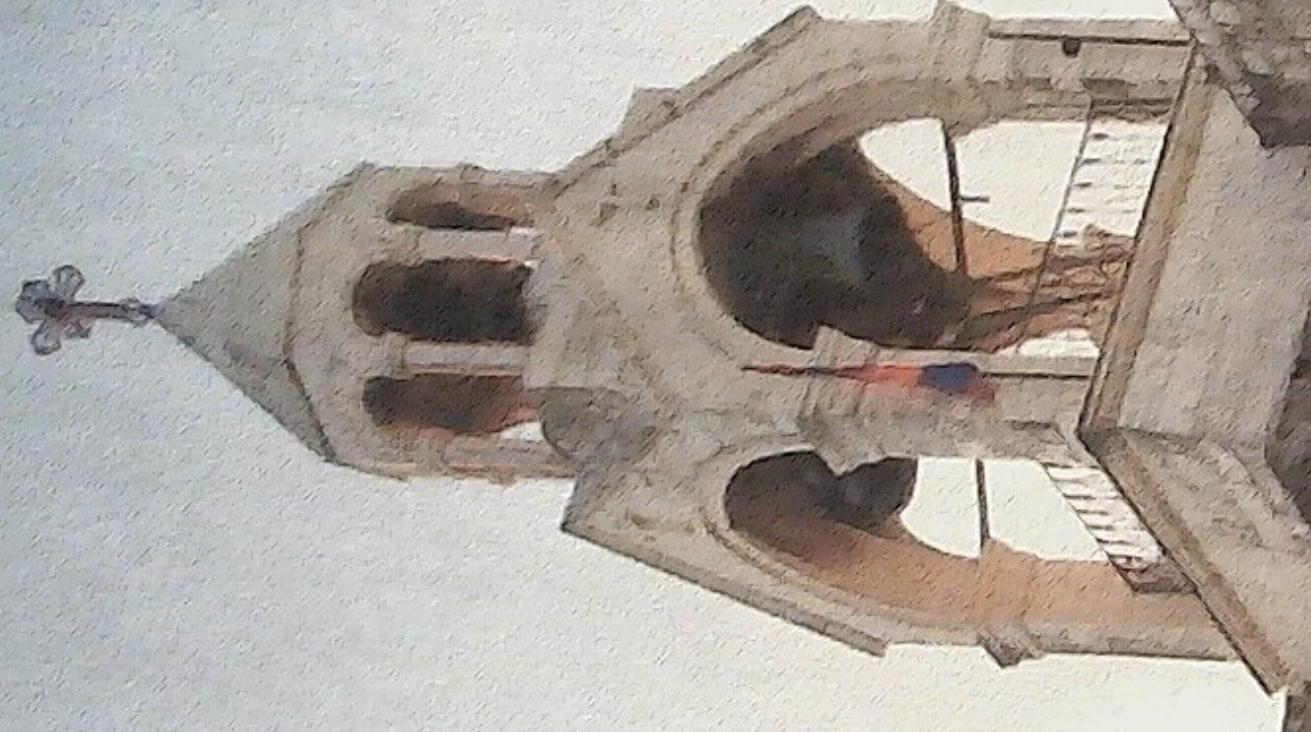
This rendering of the Adoration of the Magi by Georg Pencz depicts the story of the three wise men who, guided by a bright star, travel from afar to worship the baby Jesus.



A SAVIOR IS BORN

The birth of Jesus produced some of the most familiar and beloved stories in the history of Christianity.

Two thousand years after it was founded, Christianity remains a vibrant religion that continues to draw visitors to holy sites in Israel, including the Church of the Nativity, honored by many as the birthplace of Jesus.



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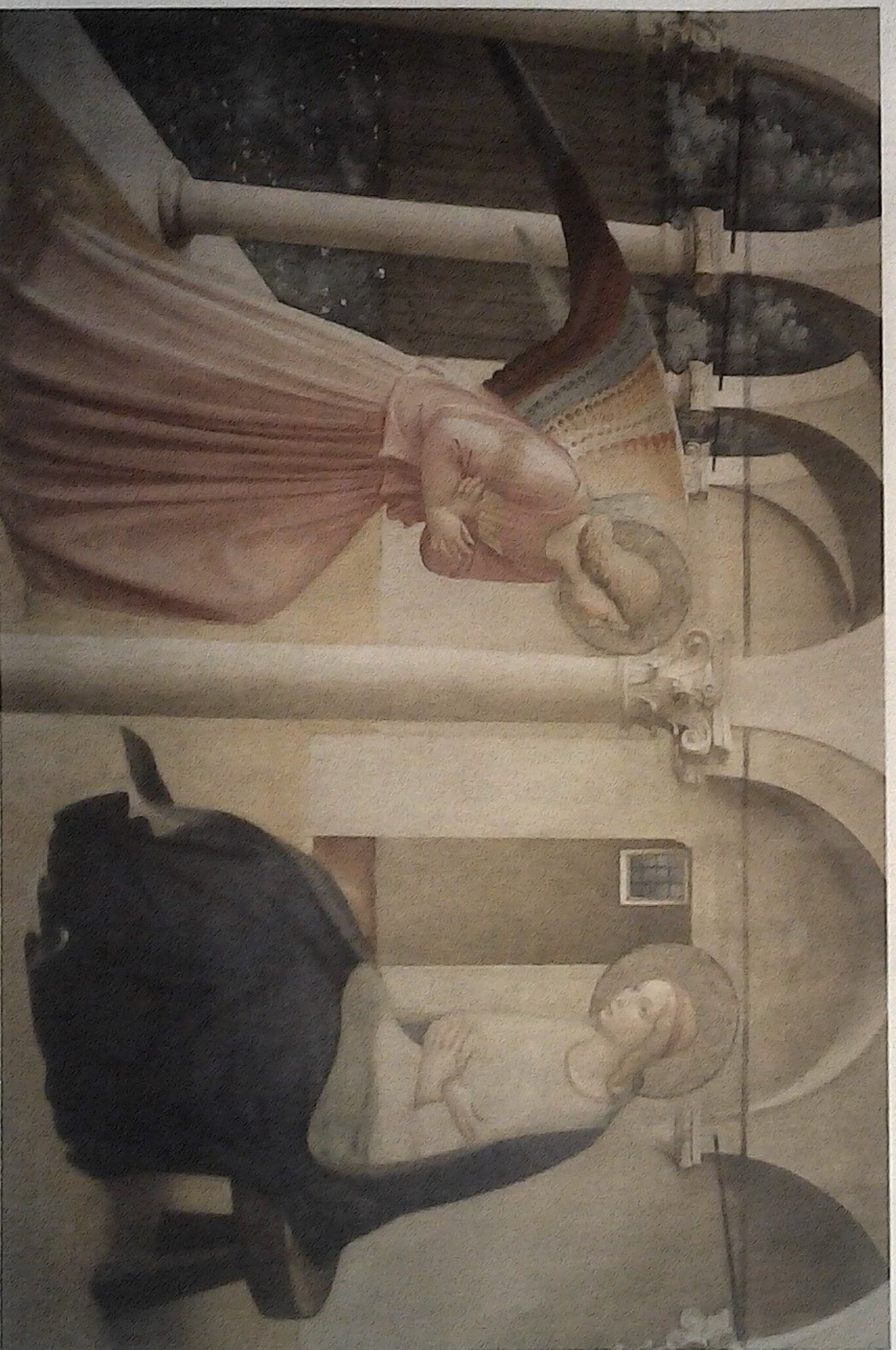
HE STORY OF JESUS'S LIFE BEGINS, AS EVERY
LIFE MUST, WITH HIS BIRTH. HAVE THERE BEEN
ANY TALES IN HUMAN HISTORY MORE SOULFUL,

richer in depth and interest, or more powerfully evocative than those that believers recite every year at Christmas? Let's begin by simply letting the stories speak for themselves. The quotations used below are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible—as are all the scriptural passages cited in this book—and we begin with the Gospel according to Luke, which is the version of the story most familiar and celebrated.

Luke makes carefully constructed “annunciations,” which feature appearances by angels to Mary, the mother of Jesus, with an important message: The child to be born has a vital role to play, one foretold of in the scriptures. As the angel famously says to Mary:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.”

“Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God...’ Then Mary said, ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’”



According to Luke, it was the angel Gabriel who announced to Mary that the child she would bear would be “great” and “will be called the Son of the Most High.” The artwork above depicting the scene was created by Fra Angelico in the fifteenth century and appears in the Convent of San Marco in Florence, Italy.

A BIRTH TO BE CELEBRATED

Soon follows the vivid birth story itself, which begins with Luke's placing of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. "While they were there," Luke reports, "the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'"

"When the angels had left them and gone into

heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."

FAMOUS ADDITIONS TO THE STORY

Other parts of the story are added by Matthew, who also has an annunciation, but in this case, the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream to assure him that the child Mary will bear is "from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew then presents the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (7:14), which calls for a woman to "conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

Matthew then brings his own distinctive vignettes to the birth story, including the story of the vengeful King Herod, who hears of a child "born King of the Jews" and commissions a collection of wise men to find Jesus so that he, Herod, might "pay him homage." The wise men, following a star that guides them on

Three wise men following a bright star through the desert to visit the baby Jesus is part of the Christmas story that is unique to the Gospel of Matthew.



The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth includes a cave where the remains of the home believed to be Mary's are preserved. pilgrims visit the sacred site from all over the world.





Painted on the ceiling of a church in Switzerland, the birth scene is one of great joy. Angels hold a ribbon bearing the words they sang to shepherds: *Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus* (Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will).



their journey, find the child, offer Him gifts, and then, learning of Herod's bad intentions in a dream, foil Herod's plan to find and possibly harm the child. Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with their newborn son and only settle back in Galilee after the death of Herod, when an angel tells Joseph it is safe to return.

JOY TO THE WORLD!

For those of us who are Christians, it may matter less the exact story of how Jesus was born—what matters is that he *was* born. For us, the Christmas season is a time of great joy, when we gather together, sing the traditional anthems, and give thanks to God for the gift He gave to the world in the form of His son, Jesus. Services are routinely held late on Christmas Eve and the feeling in the air is one of great expectation, as if indeed the birth of Jesus is happening all over again, right here in the twenty-first century. Near the end of the service, the parishioners, often with candles in hand providing the only light in the darkened sanctuary, rise to sing perhaps the holiest of the carols, “Silent Night.”

Silent night, holy night!

All is calm, all is bright.

Round yon virgin, mother and child.

Holy infant so tender and mild.

Sleep in heavenly peace,

Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!

Shepherds quake at the sight.

Glories stream from heaven afar.

Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia.

Christ the Savior is born!

Christ the Savior is born.

Silent night, holy night!

Son of God, love's pure light.

Radiant beams from Thy holy face,

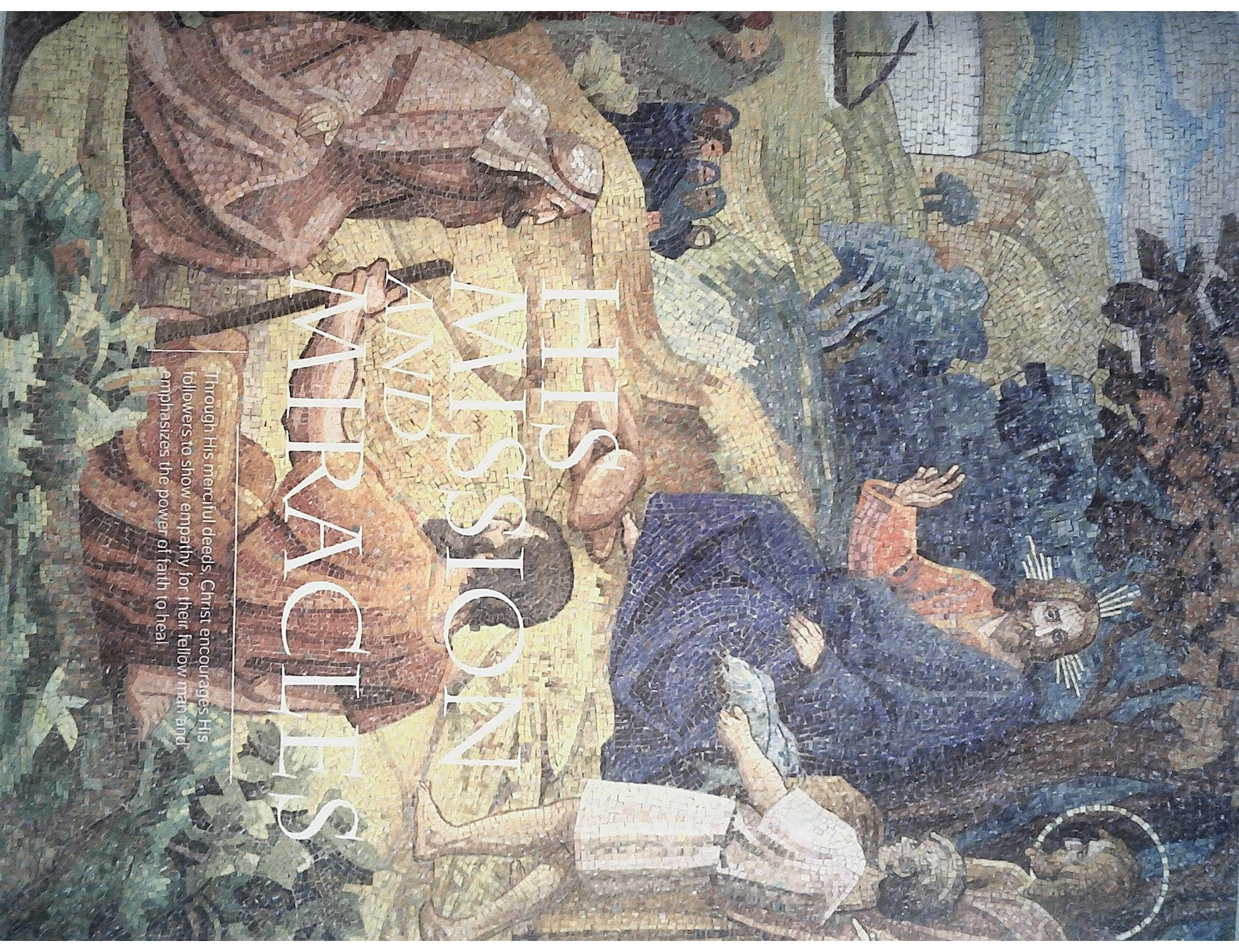
With the dawn of redeeming grace,

Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,

Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.



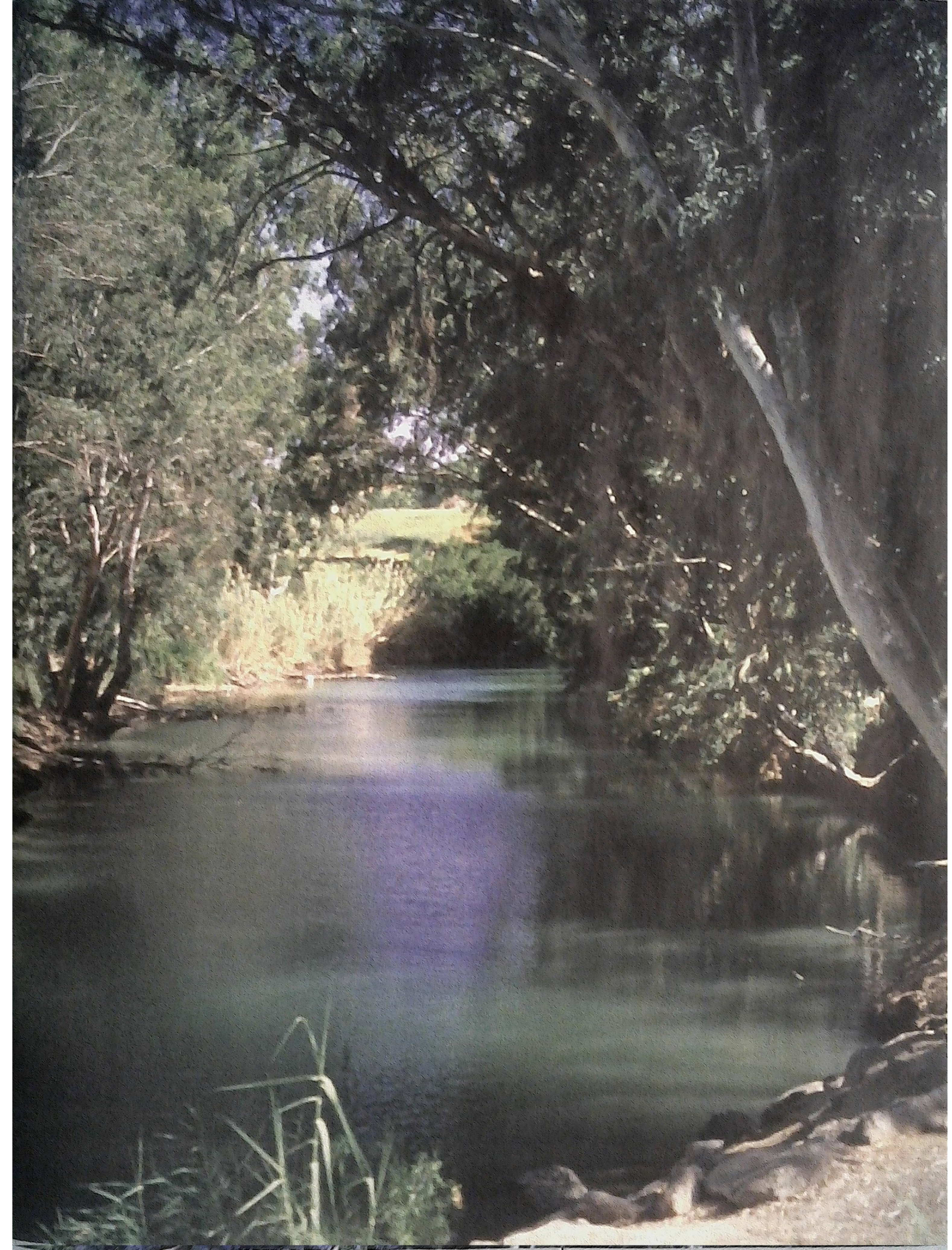
Possibly one of the best-known miracles is that of the loaves and the fishes, where Jesus demonstrates His compassion for the hungry by blessing their few loaves and fishes, causing them to multiply.



HIS MISSION AND MIRACLES

Through His merciful deeds, Christ encourages His followers to show empathy for their fellow man and emphasizes the power of faith to heal.







THE HEALING POWER OF FAITH

Jesus demonstrates his ability to heal many different illnesses right from the very beginning of His ministry. Nine amazing examples of people he healed are mentioned in at least two of the Gospels:

- ♦ Peter's mother-in-law, who is suffering from a high fever;
- ♦ a man who has leprosy (though it should be noted that, in Jesus's time, "leprosy" referred to any number of skin diseases, including psoriasis);
- ♦ a centurion's servant who is "close to death" (Luke 7:2), even though the soldier is not a Jew and represents the hated Roman regime;
- ♦ a paralyzed man, who has to be lowered through the roof of the home where Jesus is teaching in order to get past the impenetrable crowds;
- ♦ a man with a "withered hand," which Jesus restores in the synagogue and on the Sabbath (an event the Gospel writers present as appalling to the Pharisees, who viewed such acts as forbidden by Jewish law);
- ♦ the daughter of Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, who had appeared to be dead;
- ♦ a woman who had a blood condition that caused her to dangerously hemorrhage;
- ♦ the daughter of a Phoenician woman who, like the centurion mentioned above, is not a Jew;
- ♦ a blind man, whose sight was restored by Jesus (in Matthew's version, Jesus restores the sight of two men).

Jesus often preached near the Sea of Galilee (opposite) and He and His disciples frequently crisscrossed its waters from one shore to another. In at least one instance, the crowds onshore grew so large that He was forced to cast off into the lake and preach from there.

Jesus emphasizes the faith of each person as the critical component in their healing. Luke's account of the healing of the woman with the blood condition is a good example:

"Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'" (Luke 8:43-48)

Bible scholars have pointed to the specific details contained in these healing stories as strong evidence that they are based on actual events. While the nature miracles feel more symbolic, the healing stories read more like factual reports, with specific locations, specific individuals (some of them identified by name), and very specific details about the circumstances of the healing. Something real seems to have taken place. Healings were not uncommon; they are not uncommon today. Even the medical establishment has had to acknowledge that there are numerous cases in which people with serious illnesses, even with cancer, have miraculously been cured.

TRULY I TELL YOU, IF YOU HAVE FAITH AND DO NOT DOUBT...IT WILL BE DONE.

MATTHEW 21:21



The miracle of Jesus calming the sea is recalled in countless works of art, including this one painted on an altar in Croatia. The most famous rendition, Rembrandt's *Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee*, was tragically stolen in 1990 and remains missing to this day.

THE NATURE MIRACLES

To our ears, many of the stories of Jesus's miracle seem strange, even unbelievable, and contrary to our understanding of the way the world works. But in Jesus's time, such wondrous events were commonly reported, and many of the other prophets and preachers in Palestine would have shared similar stories.

The so-called "nature miracles" are especially difficult to understand. There are five that appear in at least two of the Gospels.

The first, described in the Gospel of Matthew, is when Jesus calms a stormy sea—and the fears of the disciples:

"And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so

great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'" (Matthew 8:23–27)

The next two nature miracles happen consecutively in both Matthew and Mark. The first involves the "feeding of the five thousand" and the second, following immediately, describes Jesus walking on water to get to the disciples who are struggling with an

TEACHINGS AND PARABLES

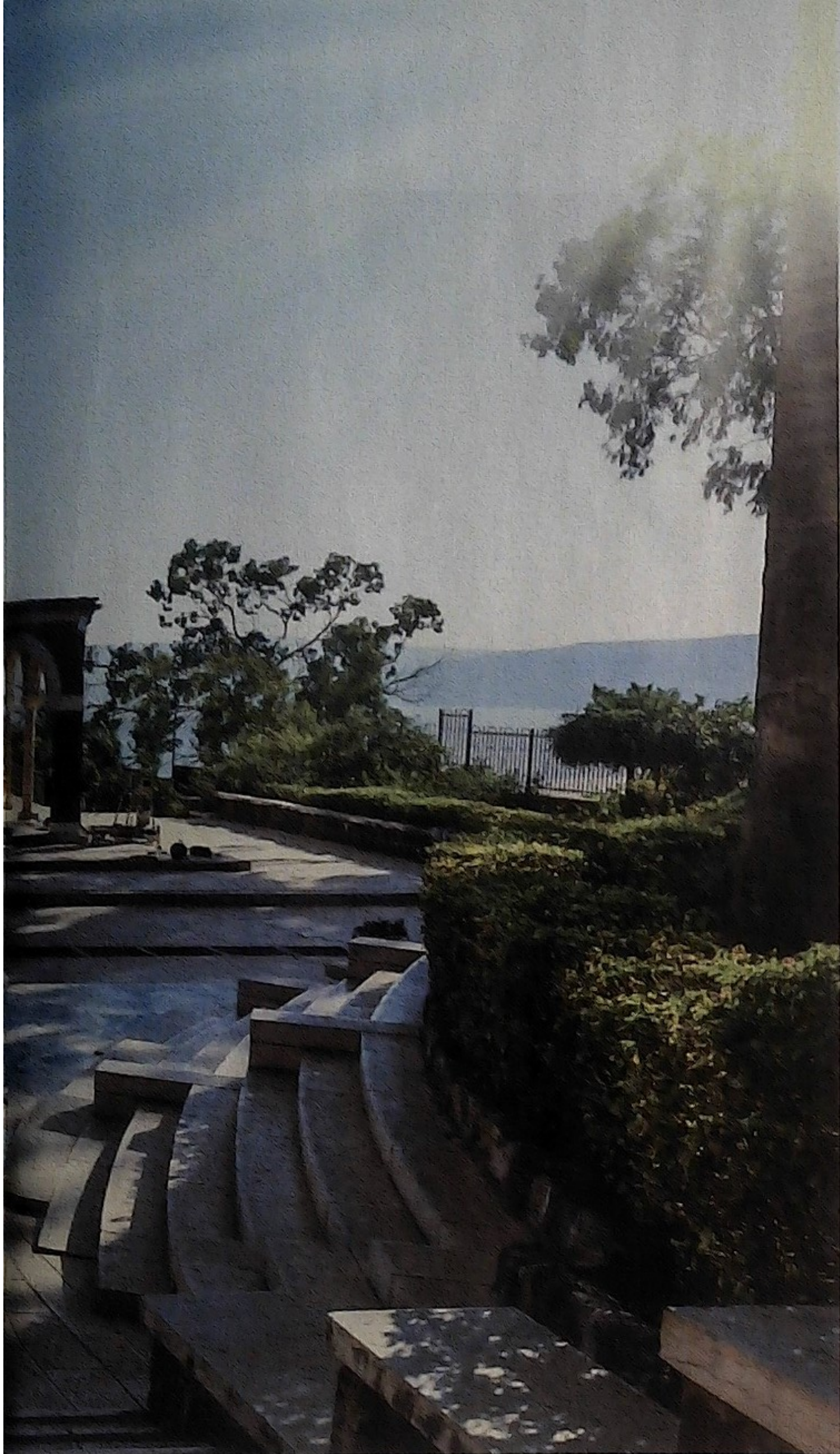
Even contemporary Christians can underestimate how radical the message of Jesus was in the first century and just how challenging it remains today



THE INSPIRING DEEDS OF JESUS ARE OFTEN ACCOMPANIED BY SAYINGS AND PARABLES THAT CHALLENGE THE GENERALLY ACCEPTED

views of the day. In many cases, He speaks very directly; in others, He communicates through aphorisms—short, clever phrases that simply express an important concept; and in others, He uses vivid stories known as parables to convey His teachings. Many

scholars believe Jesus spoke in parables so frequently because they invite discussion, encourage interpretation, and ask every listener to find some meaning in them. Because of this, the parables have been interpreted in many different ways over the centuries.



Though the evidence gathered through the centuries is not conclusive, the Church of the Beatitudes (above) marks the spot where many believe Jesus spoke what are perhaps His most famous words: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

DO TO OTHERS
AS YOU WOULD
HAVE THEM
DO TO YOU.

LUKE 6:31

AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE OF HOPE

Both Matthew and Luke recall Jesus's public teachings starting with the Sermon on the Mount, where he shared the eight blessings known as the Beatitudes. Jesus's words are moving even in our age. But to those he spoke to at the time—people who suffered from lack of opportunity, poverty and grief over the loss of friends and family in repeated conflicts with the oppressive Roman regime—Jesus's words must have been positively explosive. Matthew's version is more spiritual in emphasis; Luke's is more direct:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6:20–31)



A NEW WAY OF THINKING AND ACTING

Even as the Beatitudes give hope to those who are suffering, they challenge listeners to embrace a new way of thinking and behaving. In another passage, Matthew 19:23–24, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” The message is clear: The kingdom of God will not belong to the ones who seem to have all the money and power in this world. Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes (5:3–11) confirms this notion, adding the following to Luke’s retelling: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.... Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” The meek, the

pure in heart, and the peacemakers aren’t typically the ones the world believes will triumph. How would the hungry, poor, oppressed Jews of the time have reacted to this message?

A VERY DIFFERENT MESSENGER

And of course, it wasn’t just Jesus’s message that was revolutionary. It was also the way he lived—associating with tax collectors and prostitutes, preaching and healing among the Gentiles, sharing meals with whoever wished to join Him. Many of these behaviors were thought to be improper and were even considered by the Pharisees to be contrary to Jewish law, particularly when they took place on the Sabbath. Jesus offered teachings and parables in response to all the objections; time after time He rejects the law in favor of compassion, inclusivity and connection. His



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Jesus healed strangers and would-be enemies as depicted in this painting (opposite) as He spread His message of compassion and inclusivity. Further, He

upset the expected order of power when He insisted that the kingdom of heaven awaited not the powerful, but the lowly, and He invited children into that fold.

disciples, who still held on to traditional thinking and were concerned about status and position, are constantly confronted by Jesus.

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples

spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” (Mark 10:13–16)

Imagine the disciples’ response to this event: “The kingdom belongs to the little children? We thought it belonged to us!”



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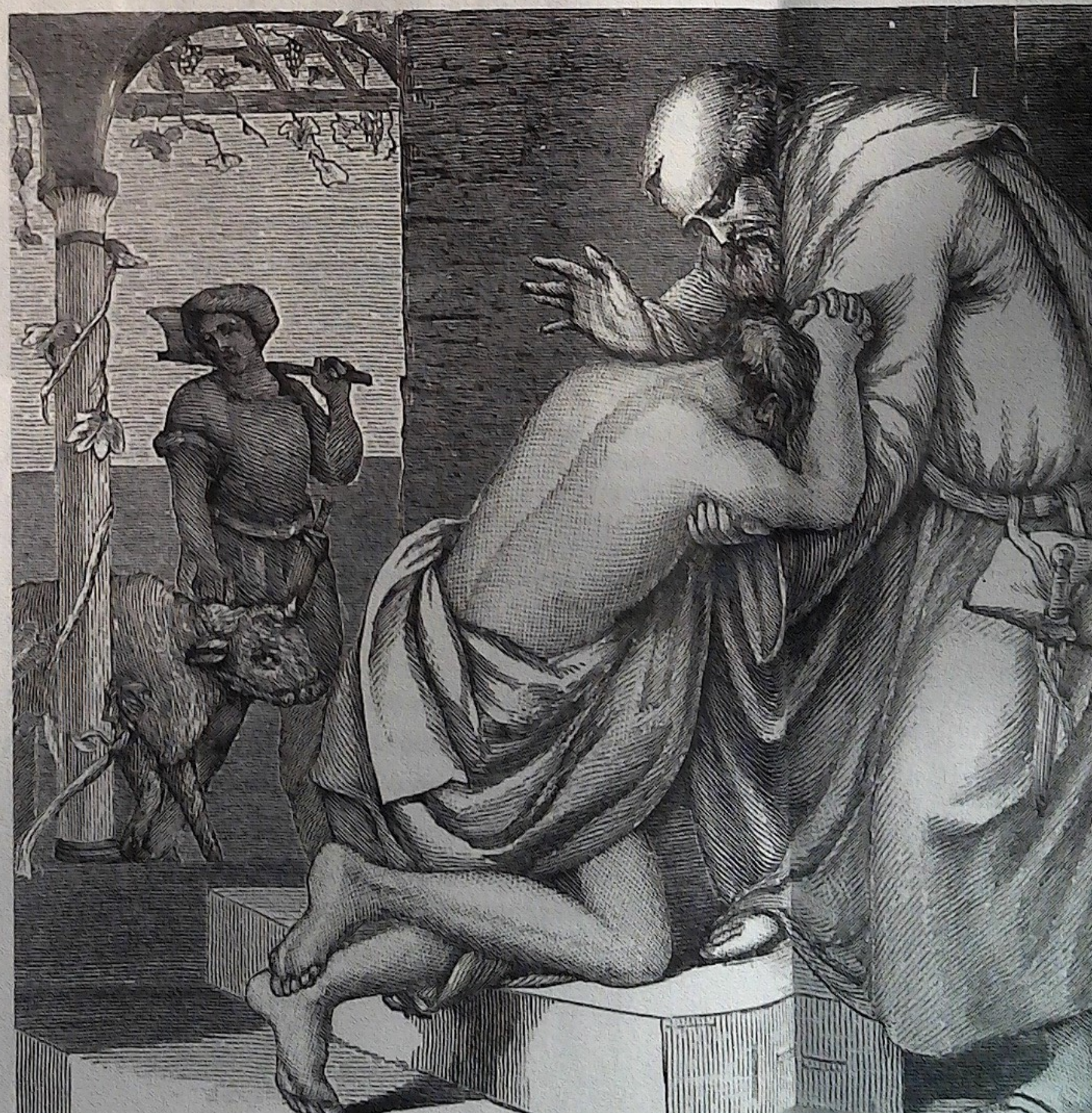
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THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Two of Jesus's most well-known parables appear only in the Gospel of Luke but are very much a part of His message throughout His ministry. The first is known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Luke 10:30-37)

It is difficult to overstate the impact this parable must have had on Jesus's audience. A man is traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a route known to be dangerous, where criminals lie in wait for unwary travelers. Sure enough, the man is attacked, beaten, and left by the side of the road. Two prominent members of the Jewish clergy come upon the scene and scuttle by on the other side of the road. And who becomes the hero of the tale? A man from Samaria, a region widely reviled in Galilee and Judea, whose people were considered unclean, inferior, and not to be valued or respected. To the traditional Jewish listeners, this parable must have come like a bolt from the blue, as it surely was not what they expected.



THE PRODIGAL SON

The other familiar parable from Luke is the tale of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Again, Jesus presents a story that runs counter to expectations. A man has two sons. The older son stays home, helps his father, and obeys all the rules. The younger son takes his inheritance, leaves home, and squanders his fortune through all sorts of immoral behavior. Returning in disgrace, the younger son throws himself at his father's feet. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Rather than responding with condemnation and judgment, the father answers his son's despair with compassion, ordering that a feast be organized to celebrate the return of his wayward son. The elder son learns of this celebration and is furious. "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" The father's response is simple: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The majority of Jesus's listeners—and perhaps a high percentage of people hearing this story today—would probably have identified with the outrage of the older brother. The moralism of the day, not to mention typical family custom, called for the younger son to be condemned and punished. As it is frequently interpreted, is this parable intended to illustrate God's forgiveness of human sin? Possibly, but it also serves again to illustrate the radically new notion of human relations to be expected in the newly declared kingdom of God. As reported in Matthew (18:21-22), "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'"





The *Glory of the Heart of Jesus* was painted in the 1900s in a church in Barcelona, making it a modern work. In this painting, we see Jesus rejecting the idea that social standing is a measure of personal worthiness, a theme that, centuries later, can also be considered very modern.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD



Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to the tiny mustard seed (above)—very familiar to His first-century audience—which matures into the hardy mustard plant.

The single most important concept to grasp among all of Jesus's teachings is His understanding of the kingdom of God. From the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is already here, but also as something yet to come. Many of the parables specifically address the coming of the kingdom. In other cases, the kingdom is not mentioned at all, but Jesus uses language to suggest what the coming of the kingdom should mean. N. T. Wright, the author of *Simply Jesus* (HarperCollins, 2011), says these parables—as well as Jesus's actions and behaviors—are meant to give us a picture of what life in the kingdom will be like:

"They are saying: 'Don't be surprised, but *this* is what it looks like when God's in charge....' God was fixing things, mending things, mending *people*, making new life happen. This was the new world in which the promises were coming true, in which new creation was happening, in which a real 'return from exile' was taking place in the hearts and minds and lives both of notorious sinners and of people long crippled by disease."

Of course this kingdom was not the one people expected. The Jewish people of Jesus's time expected that they would return from exile by military and polit-

ical means—by defeating and banishing the Romans, allowing them to reestablish an independent Jewish state, run by reliably righteous Jewish leadership. All this talk of love and forgiveness and healing was not the kind of revolution that Jesus's listeners had in mind at all. Yes, He sounded a bit like the apocalyptic prophets the people were accustomed to hearing: He does speak about remaining watchful for the coming of God's judgment—several of the parables are devoted to this concept—but this notion of the kingdom being among us, the idea of God being "in charge," as Wright describes it, was difficult for people to understand.

But the parables provide some clues. In Matthew (13:31–32), Jesus offers this: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." This parable is quickly followed by another: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." (Matthew 13:33) In both of these cases, Jesus presents the kingdom as something that would grow, flourish, and evolve as increasing numbers of His followers began to embrace His vision of the way God intended the world to be.



Jesus came to embody the idea of unconditional love. Statues erected in His honor, like the famous *Christ the Redeemer* monument in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and this similar one it inspired, *Christ the King*, that embraces the city of Lisbon, Portugal, serve as a reminder of His messages of peace.

AGENT OF CHANGE

The teachings of Jesus are a clear call for change: unconditional love for all; endless forgiveness, even for those who may hate and persecute you; an egalitarian society in which all social distinctions are abolished; a kingdom of God, here and yet to come, in which the power dynamics of the world we know are turned upside down; forceful rejection and condemnation of the status quo and its hypocrisy; a call for sacrifice and discipleship. Jesus is by turns loving, passionate,

forgiving, critical, and mournful. In the end, it is no surprise that these messages, which pose a direct challenge to the political and religious authorities, would provoke hostility and opposition. The Jewish authorities thought He was trying to undermine their power and rules; the Romans thought He was promoting a revolution. In one sense, they were quite wrong. But in another, they were also quite right. Jesus came to change it all.

The Christian presence is still very much in evidence in contemporary Jerusalem. This is the dome on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, believed to be the location where Jesus died and was buried.



CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION



The Festival of Passover is in full swing and the holy city of Jerusalem is teeming with visitors as the story of Jesus hurtles toward its conclusion on the cross.

Nighttime is holy in Jerusalem, particularly in the part of the city known as the Old City. Caravans of pilgrims are frequently in evidence, like those held above by the Good Friday service commemorating the Crucifixion of Jesus (opposite). Such services often conclude with the extinguishing of the candles, leaving participants at least temporarily in total darkness, a vivid symbol of the despair associated with the death of Christ.





THE STORY OF JESUS'S ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM, CELEBRATED ON PALM SUNDAY IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, APPEARS IN ALL FOUR GOSPELS.

Here's the version that appears in the Gospel of Mark:

"When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethpage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' " (Mark 11:1-10)

Jesus's choice to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey was consistent with His mission to challenge traditions and change the way people thought about the world. His birth in a manger, the ideas He expressed in the Beatitudes, riding on a lowly donkey: These actions supported his overall message: The last shall be first; the high shall be laid low.

CONFLICT AT THE TEMPLE

After his triumphant arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus enters the Temple and engages in His famous conflict with the money changers. During the days leading up to Passover, thousands of Jewish pilgrims would have flocked to Jerusalem to visit the Temple and make a ritual sacrifice (typically lamb or occasionally goat, but poorer Jews often made do with doves). Frequently pilgrims had to purchase their sacrificial animal in the Temple complex itself. The money-changers were needed to convert all currency to shekels, the only form of payment accepted in the Temple.

Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple, saying "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." (Matthew 21:13)

It's clear that Jesus's actions would have angered

the Jewish leadership by creating issues between them and the Roman authorities. The Romans counted on the Jewish leaders to keep their people under control and allowed them in exchange to practice their religion and collect their fees in whatever way they saw fit. Many believe that upsetting this delicate balance may have led to his crucifixion.

GETHSEMANE AND JESUS'S ARREST

The story of Jesus's long night of grief in the garden of Gethsemane is one of the most moving in the New Testament. As Matthew tells it:

"Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See my betrayer is at hand.' " (26:36-46)

This story is immediately followed by the account of Jesus's arrest. Those who come to take Him include the Jewish chief priests, scribes, elders, and the Temple

This is the garden of Gethsemane today. Might a scene like this have been the same one that Jesus gazed upon on the night before His arrest and crucifixion? Many Christians believe so.







THE LAST SUPPER

There are similar accounts of the Last Supper in all of the Gospels, but only Luke included the words, "Do this in remembrance of me," the idea that has become the basis of the act of Communion in Christian churches today. Here is Matthew's account:

"While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'" (Matthew 26:26-29)

Today, the Communion ritual is administered in a variety of ways in different Christian churches: Some incorporate wine, others grape juice; some use special Communion wafers, others bread. In some churches, the elements are passed around while the congregation stay seated, and in others, worshippers leave their seats and line up to receive Communion. The person administering communion typically repeats the words "The blood of Christ" and "The body of Christ" as each worshipper receives the wine and bread.

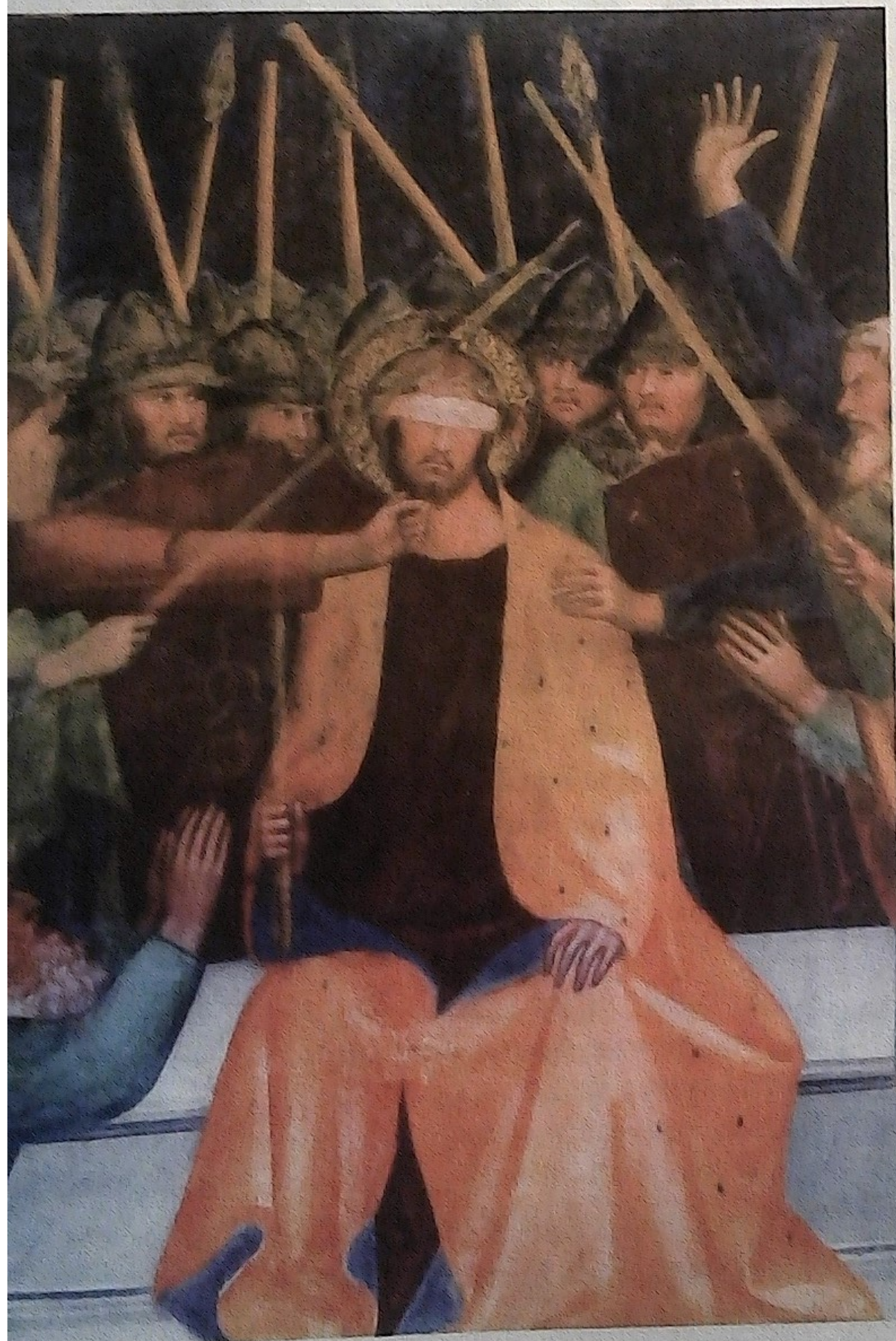
This mosaic (above) by Giacomo Raffaelli is a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper (c. 1494-98), one of the most famous in the world. The disciples are all reacting to the moment when Jesus tells them that one of them will betray Him.



Despite the differences, the meaning of the ritual is the same: Through Communion, Christians remember the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and, in a symbolic way, participate in it. Jesus is present in the bread and wine. The faithful know this without question.

respond vaguely: "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." (John 18:30) But the crowd that has gathered to watch the proceedings voices another answer when Pilate presents Jesus to them: "We have a law," they say, "and according to that law, he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God." (John 19:7)

Jesus was mocked and brutally beaten. "And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face." (John 19:2-3)



The art of painting over plaster is called a "fresco," and this type of painting was frequently used in churches, like this scene (lower left) from a medieval church in Italy, where Jesus is given a crown of thorns and mocked by His captors. The much-rendered crucifixion

scene is a haunting image, often depicted with Jesus looking skyward, seemingly beseeching God for help in His time of need. This version from a church in Granada, Spain (opposite), presents Jesus at rest, surrounded by muddy darkness, His agony on the cross over at last.

THE CRUCIFIXION

The brutality of Jesus's crucifixion is undeniable. Crucifixion was intended to make an example of slaves and insurrectionists to prevent others from even thinking about rebelling against the authorities. That's why the victims were left hanging on their crosses, sometimes for days at a time, in places where their agony would be witnessed by as many people as possible.

Before his crucifixion, Jesus was beaten with whips—in a process known as "scourging." This punishment was extremely brutal because of the specially designed whips that typically consisted of multiple strands, each tipped or studded with something hard and sharp like metal, sheep bones, glass, or rocks. Biblical scholars suggest that in Jesus's case, the scourging was intended to accelerate Jesus's death.

THE CRY FROM THE CROSS

Jesus's final words from the cross demonstrate his humanity in a very striking way. Yes—he healed the sick, fed the hungry and performed miracles witnessed by many. But the emotion and pain he expresses just before his death shows that he is both divine and human. Mark describes it this way: "At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabac-thani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34) Almost immediately afterward, Mark reports, "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last." (Mark 15:37) According to Luke, Jesus also says: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). In the book of John, Jesus dies with these simple words: "It is finished." (John 19:30)



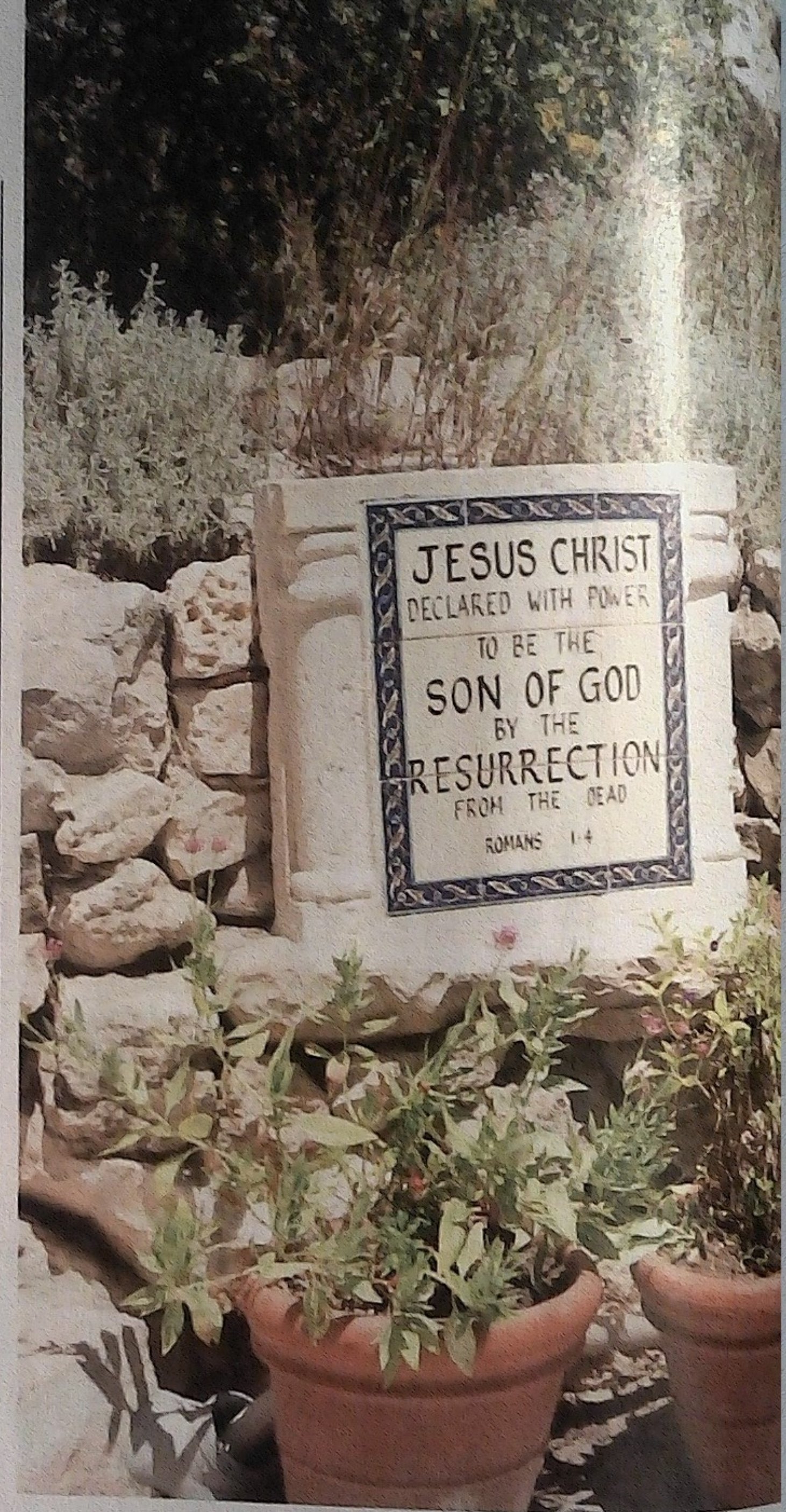
THE LORD IS RISEN!

Jesus's body, wrapped in a "clean linen cloth" (Matthew), is placed in a tomb "hewn out of the rock" (Mark) not far from the site of the crucifixion. A large rock is rolled in front of the entrance. Mary Magdalene and the other women who witness the agony and death of Jesus are present for His burial in the tomb.

According to the Gospels, the crucifixion of Jesus took place on a Friday, meaning that the women could not return to the tomb to properly anoint Jesus's body with oils and perfumes until Sunday morning—that would have been prohibited on Saturday, the Sabbath. When they return to the tomb on that Sunday, they are stunned by what they find: The stone has been rolled away from the entrance and the body is gone.

"When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed: you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." (Mark 16:1-8)

Matthew offers a more dramatic version of the women's experience at the tomb: "And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like light-



Just outside Jerusalem's Old City walls is the Garden Tomb. Believed to be the place where Jesus was buried, the area has bloomed

into a garden where visitors to the Holy Land can come to bear witness and reflect on their faith and connection to Jesus Christ.

ning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.'" (Matthew 28:2-6)

One of Christianity's holiest sites, the lavishly decorated Church of the Holy Sepulchre, is honored as containing Golgotha, the site of Jesus's Crucifixion, as well as the very spot where

His body was anointed and buried. The church also contains the Rock of Calvary and, in between its two sides, the very hole in which the cross of Christ is said to have been secured.

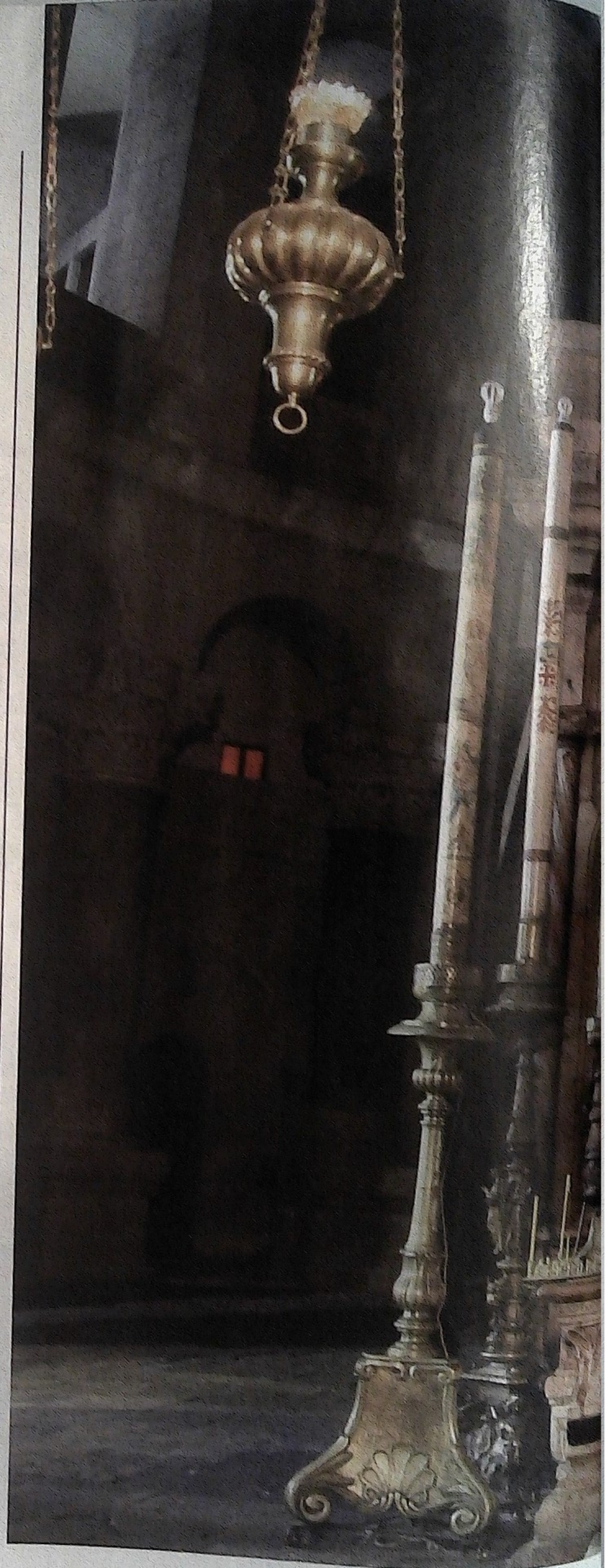
sense of the of God within them, and their connection to a spiritual reality that is the source of their faith. For Christians, God's presence in the world was expressed in the man Jesus. Do they believe this because, in the words of the children's song, "the Bible tells me so"? No, most Christians believe because they know in their hearts and souls.

As Christians gather for holiday services, we are a diverse group. We are black and white, rich and poor, male and female, young and old, gathered from every corner of the globe. The ways in which we understand Jesus and His message are vary widely, expressed many conflicting theological positions and liturgical expressions. Catholics do not worship in the same way as Presbyterians, who do not worship in the same way as Episcopalians, who do not worship in the same way as those in the Greek Orthodox tradition. But on Easter morning, this Christian family shouts in one voice: Jesus Christ is risen! The cross is not the final answer. In worship services everywhere, Christians sing the words of the beloved eighteenth-century hymn:

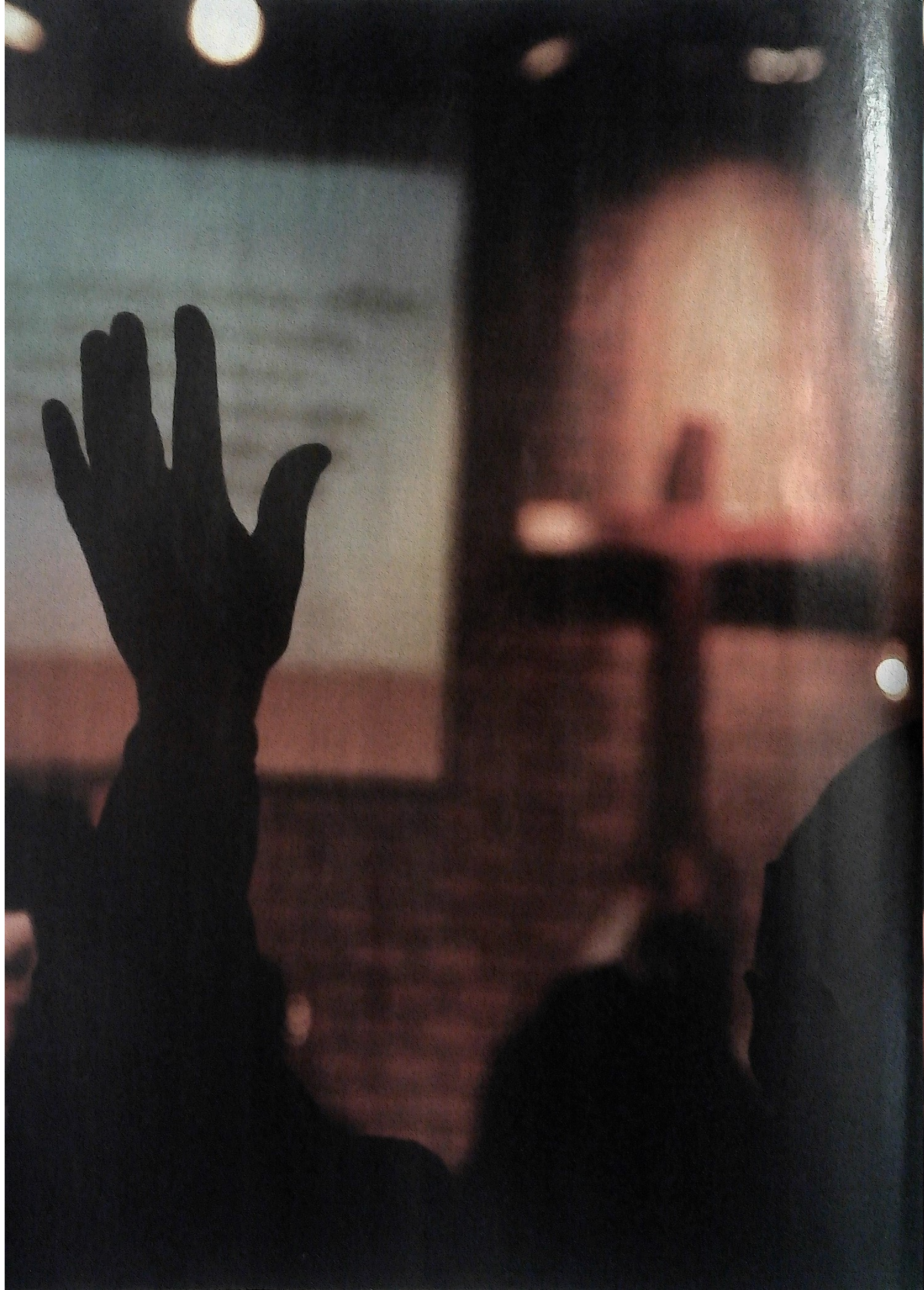
*Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!
Who did once, upon the cross, Alleluia!
Suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!*

*Hymns of praise then let us sing, Alleluia!
Unto Christ, our heavenly King, Alleluia!
Who endured the cross and grave, Alleluia!
Sinners to redeem and save. Alleluia!*

For people of faith, this holy morning simply confirms their own experience. We know that Jesus lives. We feel Him in our hearts.







THE LEGACY OF JESUS CHRIST

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH, LIKE THE MUSTARD TREE IN THE PARABLES OF JESUS, BEGAN FROM A TINY SEED, FROM A SMALL BUT DEVOTED

band of followers, but soon it grew into a mighty force that would extend to the four corners of the earth and influence the culture and faith of millions. In the beginning, there was persecution, there were martyrs, there was fierce opposition from the prevailing authorities, both religious and political. Many died for their religious beliefs, but this hardy faith, with its roots firmly planted in the hearts of the early believers, could not be extinguished. Paul, the first and greatest of the early evangelists for the faith, fearlessly preached the message of Jesus, or, as he noted in his first letter to the church in Corinth: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Paul's message of God's love expressed through the death and resurrection of Jesus spread with astonishing quickness and soon the Gentile world was as receptive to the Christian message as the land where Jesus was born.

Through the succeeding centuries, the Christian church grew in myriad ways that no one could have

foreseen in the beginning. By the end of the fourth century, this tiny Jewish sect centered in Palestine had become Christianity with a capital C, an imperial religion and the only one tolerated and deemed "legal" by the Roman Empire. Today, of course, even the boundaries of the ancient Roman Empire cannot begin to define the scope of Christian influence. Latin America, Asia, and Africa all experienced periods of explosive growth in their Christian populations and all today include thriving and vibrant Christian communities. The faith is alive and well all over the globe.

Christianity and its many offshoots has, of course, hardly been perfect in the many years since its inception, but it has often been very much a positive force nonetheless, displaying just the sort of love, compassion, and forgiveness that was central to the message of Jesus. In the United States alone, church people and the institutions they represented played a critical role in the abolitionist and civil rights

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movements, as well as the so-called “social gospel” that demanded action on behalf of the less fortunate among us. Quite frequently the churches have taken such action themselves whenever they have had the means and the resources to do so, feeding, clothing, and finding housing for people in desperate need. Today’s mainline Christian institutions are associated with numerous causes that powerfully reflect the message of Jesus.

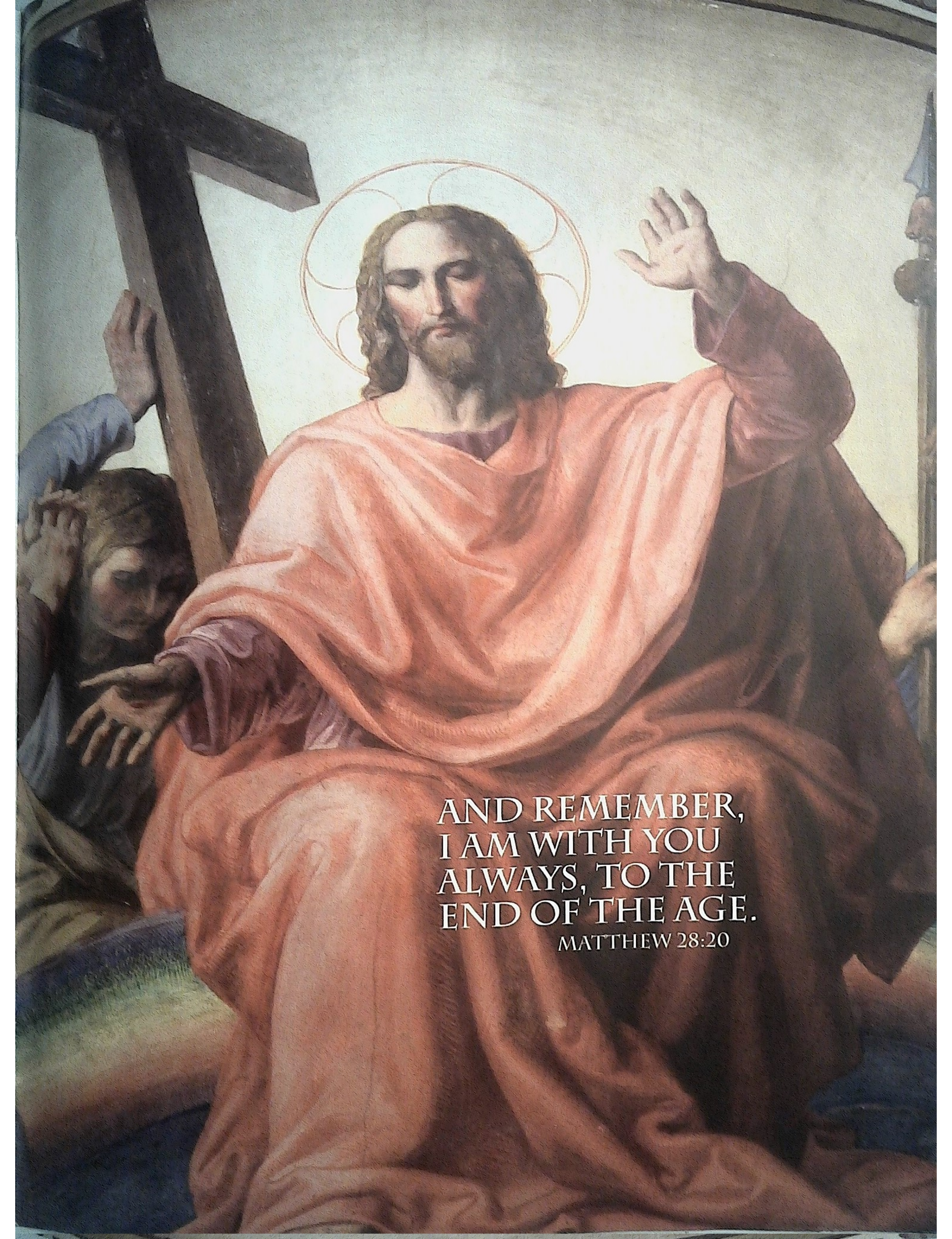
Of course, far more than any particular institutional expression, Christianity is about the people who participate in it and the men and women who commit their lives to leading it. And while the clergy have come in for some legitimate criticism in recent years, the overwhelming majority of its members are people of tremendous dedication, who, like the disciples of old, give their lives to their faith, eschewing material gain and the marks of status that go along with worldly success. They are present for their flocks in every imaginable circumstance: birth and death; marriage and divorce; triumph and tragedy. The legacy of Jesus can be seen in their service every single day.

That legacy can be seen too in the millions of Christian faithful who sit in the pews before them and strive to conduct their lives with integrity because they believe that the man they follow calls them to do so. In many ways, small and large, in communities all over the world, this hearty band reaches out to those in need, to neighbors far and wide, in ways that are consistent with the intense connection they feel to the Christ they have come to worship. They take with great seriousness the prescriptions of Jesus to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and clothe the naked. And they accept Jesus’s judgment that “just as you did it to

one of the least of these, you did it to me.” With little fanfare, acknowledging Jesus’s disdain for ostentation, they do what they believe is right. They are, without a doubt, an overwhelming force for good.

Finally, for them, for all of us who believe, more than any scholarly analysis, more than any argument about “the facts,” there is faith, steadfast and enduring, mediated, as all experience must be, through the frail and fallible human beings who possess it, interpreted and understood in a diverse range of ways through the centuries, but rooted in the hearts of the faithful through an encounter with the divine. And for Christians in particular—at least for those who take the man Jesus with any seriousness—that faith is accompanied by a belief in love, radical and all-encompassing, as the most fundamental principle that binds us all, one to another, and to an ever-forgiving God. We hope that this work will enhance such believers’ appreciation of the man whose name is so frequently on our lips and perhaps suggest ways in which we might keep the figure we worship as the Christ more consonant with the man from Galilee who started it all.

And for skeptics, as well as for those of other religious persuasions, we hope that we’ve taken a small step toward freeing the fascinating, challenging, blazingly original Jesus of history from the fraudulent boxes in which millennia of misinterpretation have constrained Him. Regardless of our different perspectives, this was a man worthy of our attention and admiration. And His message, as original today as it was when He embodied it more than 2,000 years ago, continues to resonate, calling us to consider a radically different mode of relating to one another and to our world. We could do worse than to listen.



AND REMEMBER,
I AM WITH YOU
ALWAYS, TO THE
END OF THE AGE.
MATTHEW 28:20

HE SAID TO THEM,
"BUT WHO DO YOU SAY
THAT I AM?"

—LUKE 9:20

